

https://dspace.org/

Benjamin Britten's use of the passacaglia

de Villiers, Bernadette

2015-01-19
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/16589

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S USE OF THE PASSACAGLIA

Bernadette de Villiers

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Johannesburg 1985

ABSTRACT

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was perhaps the most prolific composer of passacaglias in the twentieth century. The present study of his use of the passacaglia form is based on thirteen selected passacaglias which span his entire creative career and include all genres of his music. The passacaglias chosen occur in the following works:

- Piano Concerto, Op. 13, III
- Violin Concerto, Op. 15, III
- "Dirge" from *Serenade*, Op. 31
- *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33, Interlude IV
- "Death, be not proud!" from *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, Op. 35
- *The Rape of Lucretia*, Op. 37, II. ii
- *Albert Herring*, Op. 39, III, Threnody
- *Billy Budd*, Op. 50, I, iii
- *The Turn of the Screw*, Op . 54, II, viii
- *Noye's Fludde*, Op. 59, Storm
- "Agnus Dei" from *War Requiem*, Op. 66
- *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 68, IV
- String Quartet no. 3, Op. 94, V

The analysis includes a detailed investigation into the type of ostinato themes used, namely their structure (length, contour, characteristic intervals, tonal centre, metre, rhythm, use of sequence, derivation) method of handling the ostinato (variations in length, tone colour, above register, tempo, degree of audibility) as well as the influence of the ostinato theme on the composition as a whole (effect on length, sectionalization).

The accompaniment material is then brought under scrutiny both from the point of view of its type (thematic, motivic, unrelated counterpoints) and its importance within the overall framework of the passacaglia.

The factors responsible for the formation of the overall formal profile of the passacaglias (density, range, dynamics and rhythm) are discussed in relation to their contribution to the formal profile.

In conclusion it is found that Britten has abandoned the four or

eight measure ostinato themes, slow triple metre, trochaic rhythmic pattern and tetrachord influence which characterized Baroque passacaglias.

During the course of his passacaglias the ostinato theme lengths, tone colour, rhythm and octave register are all subjected to variation.

The accompaniment generally has the dominant role and tends to distract from the repetitions of the ostinato theme.

The interactions of the parameters of density, dynamics, rhythm and range create the formal profiles of the passacaglias. While in some passacaglias there is a correlation of interaction amongst the parameters, in other instances there are interesting contrasts especially with regard to rhythm.

Motion in the accompaniment is of prime importance in order to counteract the monotony of the ostinato repetitions. In most cases, one or more of the parameters change, usually with each statement of the ostinato.

In contrast to the Baroque period when the vast majority of passacaglias were keyboard works, Britten has not confined his passacaglias to any particular genre. All the passacaglias in this study form part of multimovement works. This is contrary to the Baroque preference of composing passacaglias as independent pieces.

Within the larger formal framework, Britten has favoured a central or final position for the passacaglia movements. When used in a central position, the passacaglia frequently has a stabilizing influence and tends to function as a focal point, while when used as a final movement, it often has a confirming function.

Britten has based his approach to the passacaglia form on the textbook definitions of the early part of the twentieth century. His passacaglias are based on a melodic ostinato which is adhered to fairly strictly throughout.

During the Baroque period, the passacaglia was essentially a monothematic form. Britten, however, juxtaposes contrasting thematic material of equal importance against the ostinato. This use of multiple themes represents a radical departure from the monothematic practice of earlier passacaglia composers.

The importance and variety of the material which he superimposes above the ostinato make any marked variation of the ostinato theme itself unnecessary. The tonal and rhythmic stability of the passacaglia theme impart a unity, cohesion and symmetry to the overall form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to the following persons and institutions:

- My promoter, Prof. C.A. van Wyk, for his constant guidance, perceptive criticism and encouragement throughout this project;
- Prof. H. Temmingh, for his many valuable suggestions;
- My colleague Dr. P.C. Stroux, for his excellent translation of several French and German texts, as well as for the interest he has shown throughout this research, and his willingness to share his knowledge.
- Mr. C.M. Vels of Boosey and Hawkes publishers, for his helpfulness in obtaining scores for me;
- The Human Sciences Research Council whose financial assistance has made this research possible.

CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT (ii)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (iv)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. THE PASSACAGLIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 1

1.1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE 1
1.2 TRADITIONAL PASSACAGLIAS 2
1.3 FREE PASSACAGLIAS 11
1.4 CONCLUSION 26

CHAPTER 2

PIANO CONCERTO, OP. 13, 1938, revised 1945

1. BACKGROUND 29

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 29

2.1 STRUCTURE 29
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 33
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 35

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 36

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 36
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 37
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 38

4. MOTION FACTORS 39

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 39
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 42
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 42

Page

5. FORMAL PLAN 42

5.1 LARGER FORM 43

CHAPTER 3

VIOLIN CONCERTO OP. 15, 1939, revised 1950

1. BACKGROUND 44

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 44

2.1 STRUCTURE 44
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 48
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 52

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 53

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 53
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 53
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 54

4. MOTION FACTORS 55

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 55
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 58

5. FORMAL PLAN 58

5.1 LARGER FORM 59

CHAPTER 4

"DIRGE" from *SERENADE*, OP. 31, 1943

1. BACKGROUND 60

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 60

2.1 STRUCTURE 60
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 63
2.3 *INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME* 64

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 64

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 64
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 65
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 66

4. MOTION FACTORS 67

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 67
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 69
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 69

5. FORMAL PLAN 69

5.1 LARGER FORM 70

Page

CHAPTER 5

PETER GRIMES, OP. 33, 1945

1. BACKGROUND 71

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 72

2.1 STRUCTURE 72
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 76
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 79

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 80

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 80
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 80
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 84

4. MOTION FACTORS 85

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 85
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 89
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 89

5. FORMAL PLAN 89

5.1 LARGER FORM 89

CHAPTER 6

THE HOLY SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE, OP. 35, 1945

No. 9. "DEATH, BE NOT PROUD!"

1. BACKGROUND 90

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 90

2.1 STRUCTURE 90
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 93
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 95

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 95

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 95
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 96
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 97

4. MOTION FACTORS 98

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 98
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 100
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 101

5. FORMAL PLAN 101

5.1 LARGER FORM 102

Page

CHAPTER 7

THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA, OP. 37, 1946

1. BACKGROUND 103

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 104

2.1 STRUCTURE 104
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 107
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 110

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 110

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 110
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 111
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 112

4. MOTION FACTORS 113

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 113
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 115
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 115

5. FORMAL PLAN 116

5.1 LARGER FORM 116

CHAPTER 8

ALBERT HERRING, OP. 39, 1947

1. BACKGROUND 118

2. NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 120

2.1 STRUCTURE 120
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 123
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 124

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 125

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 125
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 125
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 127

4. MOTION FACTORS 128

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 128
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 130
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 131

5. FORMAL PLAN 131

5.1 LARGER FORM 131

Page

CHAPTER 9

BILLY BUDD, OP. 50, 1951 revised 1960

1. BACKGROUND 132

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 133

2.1 STRUCTURE 13[illegible]
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 137
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 141

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 142

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 142
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 143
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 145

4. MOTION FACTORS 146

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 146
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 149
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 150

5. FORMAL PLAN 150

5.1 LARGER FORM 150

CHAPTER 10

THE TURN OF THE SCREW, OP. 54, 1954

1. BACKGROUND 151

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 153

2.1 STRUCTURE 153
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 162
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 164

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 165

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 165
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 165
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 166

4. MOTION FACTORS 168

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 168
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 170
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 171

5. FORMAL PROFILE 171

5.1 LARGER FORM 171

Page

CHAPTER 11

NOYE'S FLUDDE, OP. 59, 1957

1. BACKGROUND 173

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 174

2.1 STRUCTURE 174
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 178
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 181

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 181

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 181
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 182
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 183

4. MOTION FACTORS 184

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 184
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 186
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 186

5. FORMAL PLAN 186

5.1 LARGER FORM 187

CHAPTER 12

WAR REQUIEM, OP. 66, 1961

1. BACKGROUND 188

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 189

2.1 STRUCTURE 189
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 191
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 194

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 195

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 195
3.2 ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 196
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 198

4. MOTION FACTORS 199

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 199
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 201
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 201

5. FORMAL PROFILE 202

5.1 LARGER FORM 202

Page

CHAPTER 13

SYMPHONY FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 68, 1963

1. BACKGROUND 204

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 204

2.1 STRUCTURE
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 210
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 212

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 213

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 213
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 217
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 218

4. MOTION FACTORS 219

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 219
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 222
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 222

5. FORMAL PLAN 223

5.1 LARGER FORM 223

CHAPTER 14

STRING QUARTET NO. 3, OP. 94, 1975

1. BACKGROUND 225

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 225

2.1 STRUCTURE 225
2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 229
2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME 232

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT 232

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL 232
3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED 234
3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT 235

4. MOTION FACTORS

4.1 THE PARAMETERS 236
4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS 238
4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY 238

5. FORMAL PLAN 239

5.1 LARGER FORM 239

Page

CHAPTER 15

FINDINGS

1.	THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME	241
1.1	STRUCTURE	241
1.2	USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME	250
1.3	INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME	255
2.	THE ACCOMPANIMENT	256
2.1	TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL	256
2.2	THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED	257
2.3	ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT	259
3.	MOTION FACTORS	261
3.1	THE PARAMETERS	261
3.2	INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS	263
3.3	SENSE OF FINALITY	264
4.	FORMAL PLAN	266
4.1	LARGER FORM	
4.2	RELATION OF LARGER FORM TO INTENSITY PROFILE	268
4.3	CONCLUSIONS	269

CHAPTER 16

CONCLUSION

1.	REVIVAL OF THE PASSACAGLIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY	270
2.	POSSIBLE REASONS FOR BRITTEN'S USE OF THE PASSACAGLIA	271
2.1	FREEDOM WITHIN CLEARLY DEFINED LIMITS	271
2.2	LINK WITH TRADITION	271
2.3	NEED FOR UNITY AND COHESION	272
2.4	ACCESSIBILITY TO THE LISTENER	273
3.	TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO PASSACAGLIA	273
4.	GENRE	275
5.	DEATH-RELATED PASSACAGLIAS	275
6.	CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PASSACAGLIA FORM	277
6.1	CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE OSTINATO THEME	277
6.2	CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL	278
7.	POSITION WITHIN THE OVERALL FRAMEWORK	280
8.	BRITTEN'S ACHIEVEMENT	280

APPENDIX A

THE PASSACAGLIA PRIOR TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1.	SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES	281
1.1	ORIGIN OF TERM	281
1.2	EARLY SOURCES	281
1.3	THE CHACONNE	283
1.4	THE BAROQUE VARIATION PASSACAGLIA AND CHACONNE	284
2.	NINETEENTH CENTURY	302

APPENDIX B

EXTRACTS FROM SCORES

1.	B. Britten, Violin Concerto, Op. 15	306
2.	B. Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 68	309
3.	B. Britten, String Quartet no. 3, Op. 94	312

WORKS CONSULTED

1.	BOOKS	315
2.	PERIODICAL ARTICLES	318
3.	SCORES	320
4.	RECORDINGS	323

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. THE PASSACAGLIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1.1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

In the twentieth century there has been a general acceptance of the distinction between the passacaglia and chaconne made by P. Goetschius in 1915,[2] and reiterated by W. Apel. Apel bases his definition on Bach's Passacaglia in C minor for organ (BWV 582) and his Chaconne in D minor for unaccompanied violin (BWV 1004):

> A passacaglia, then, is a continuous variation based on a clearly distinguishable ostinato that normally appears in the bass but that may occasionally be transferred to an upper voice, as in Bach's passacaglia. A chaconne, on the other hand, is a continuous variation in which the "theme" is a scheme of harmonies (e.g. i-VI-IV-V) usually treated so that the first and last chords are fixed whereas the intervening ones can be replaced by substitutes.[3]

Theorists such as W. Berry,[4] L. Stein[5] and J.T. Hutcheson[6] agree with Apel's distinction. D.M. Green distinguishes between variations on a basso ostinato and variations on a succession of

---

[1] The documentation throughout this thesis is based on: Modern Language Association, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1977).

[2] P. Goetschius, *The Larger Forms of Musical Composition* (New York: Schirmer, 1915), pp 29-40.

[3] W. Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 141.

[4] W. Berry, *Form in Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 279-290.

[5] L. Stein, *Structure and Style* (Princeton: Summy Birchard, 1979), pp. 142-145.

[6] J.T. Hutcheson, *Musical Form and Analysis* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1974), Vol. 11, pp. 172-195.

harmonies.[7]

In recent years, this definition has once again been confirmed by Hudson:

> In the 20th century composers and musicologists, using Bach's passacaglia as a model, have defined the form as a set of continuous variations on a ground bass, with the ground occasionally appearing also in an upper voice. This has sometimes been extended to include a pitch ostinato, in which rhythm is not a constant factor.[8]

This chapter presents a brief discussion of representative examples of twentieth-century passacaglias in order to illustrate the context of Britten's interest in this form.

1.2 TRADITIONAL PASSACAGLIAS

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) is probably the most prolific composer of passacaglias in the twentieth century. In the thirteen passacaglias discussed in detail in the following chapters, he has, for the most part, adhered to the traditional form of the passacaglia under the influence of the Baroque composers and of H. Purcell (1659-1695) in particular.

1.2.1 M. Reger (1873-1916)

In his Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 96 (1906) and his Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 127 (1913), Reger followed the Baroque prototype and that of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) in particular. He retained the basso ostinato theme relatively unchanged throughout with variation in the upper voices.

1.2.2 P. Hindemith (1895-1963)

Following the German renewal of Baroque principles which was already

---

[7] D.M. Green, *Form in Tonal Music* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), pp. 115-123.

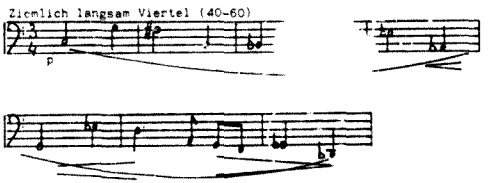
[8] R. Hudson, "Passacaglia," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie (London: MacMillan, 1980), Vol. XIV, p. 270.

evident in the works of J. Brahms (1833-1897) and Reger, Hindemith also adopted the traditional form of the passacaglia. Apart from Britten, Hindemith is probably the most generally known composer of passacaglias in the twentieth century. Four of his representative passacaglias are briefly discussed here.

1.2.2.1 *Das Marienleben*, Op. 27 (1922-1923, rev. 1936-1948)

The third in this cycle of fifteen songs is a passacaglia. The seven measure ostinato theme retains the traditional triple metre with a preponderance of trochaic rhythm. The theme contains all twelve notes of the chromatic scale with the last two notes forming tritone intervals with the first two notes.

Ex. 1: P. Hindemith, *Das Marienleben*,[9] no. 3, mm 1-7 (ostinato theme)

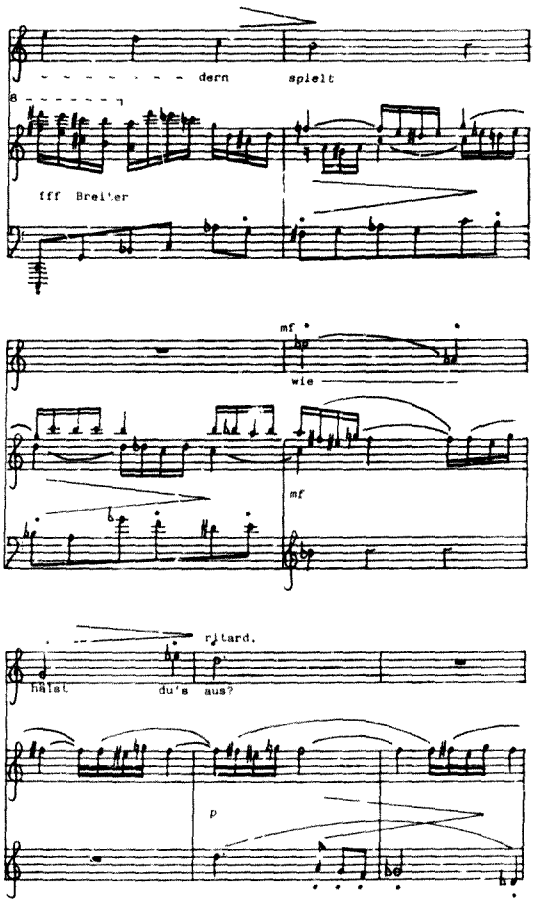


The theme is confined to the bass registers throughout except for the climactic twelfth statement where it is split between the bass and the soprano.

---

[9] P. Hindemith, *Das Marienleben*, Op. 27, no. 3 (Mainz: Schott, 1951), p. 11.

Ex. 2: P. Hindemith, *Das Marienleben*,[10] no. 3, mm. 78-84
(variation eleven; theme notes are marked *)



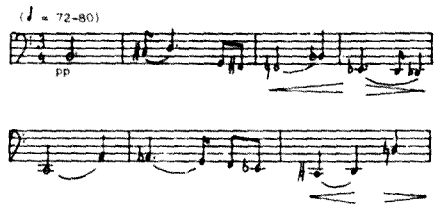
[10] Hindemith, *Das Marienleben*, p. 16.

The theme is frequently ornamented and rhythmically varied within the seven measure rhythmic unit. However, a precedent for this type of treatment can be found in the Passacaglia in C minor (BWV 582) by J S. Bach.

1.2.2.2 String Quartet no. 4, Op. 32 (1923)

This passacaglia forms the final movement of the four movement work, and is linked without a break to a fugato. Once again, Hindemith has used a seven measure theme in triple metre, which is stated twenty eight times. The theme contains eleven of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

Ex. 3: P. Hindemith, String Quartet no. 4,[11] IV, mm. 1-7 (ostinato theme)



As in the Bach Passacaglia, the initial presentation of the theme is unaccompanied, and the ostinato is not confined to the lower registers, but frequently moves into the middle and upper voices. It is also frequently ornamented and rhythmically altered while remaining within the original seven measure unit.

1.2.2.3 *Nobilissima Visione* (1938)

The passacaglia constitutes the final movement of this three movement suite, and it imparts a feeling of restlessness. The restlessness is created by the passacaglia theme itself which is characterized by syncopation and quick changing harmonic suggestions. The constant

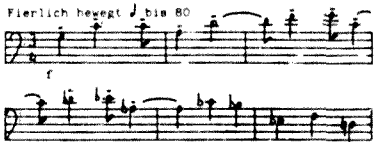
---

[11] P. Hindemith, String Quartet no. 4, Op. 32, pocket score (Mainz: Schott, 1952), p. 33.

repetitions of this active theme impart an underlying vitality to the entire movement.

Hindemith here uses a six measure ostinato theme, but retains the traditional triple metre and unaccompanied first statement. The first three measures of the theme are pentatonic but clearly on C.

Ex. 4: P. Hindemith, *Nobilissima Visione*,[12] III, mm. 1-6 (ostinato theme)



The ostinato theme is presented in its original form throughout the passacaglia. It is not confined to the bass registers and is as frequently presented in the middle and upper registers as in the bass.

1.2.2.4 Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt" (1951)

The third and final movement of this symphony is a passacaglia which is prefaced by a forty seven measure fugue. The passacaglia itself is in two sections separated by a passage of recitative. The ostinato theme of the second section is a rhythmic variant of that of the first section. The ostinato theme is closely related to that of the fugue which precedes it.

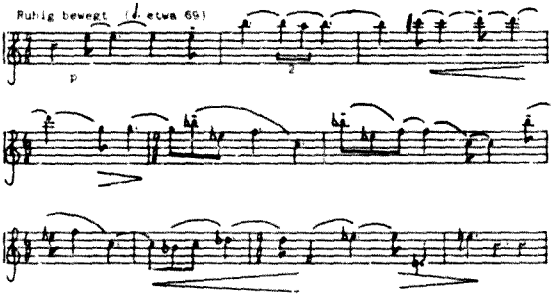
---

[12] P. Hindemith, *Nobilissima Visione*, III (1938), pocket score (Mainz: Schott, 1938), p. 48.

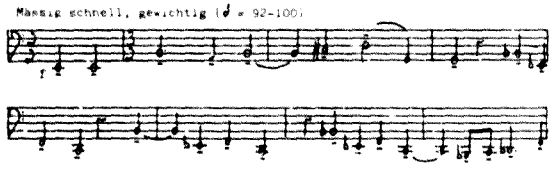
Ex. 5: P. Hindemith, Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt,"[13] III, mm. 1-53 (fugue theme)



Ex. 6: P. Hindemith, Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt,"[14] III, mm. 48-56 (ostinato theme of first section)



Ex. 7: P. Hindemith, Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt,"[15] III, mm. 168-175 (ostinato theme of second section)



---

[13] P. Hindemith, Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt" (1951), pocket score (Mainz: Schott, 1952), p. 75.

[14] Hindemith, Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt," p. 81.

[15] Hindemith, Symphonie "Die Harmonie der Welt," pp. 98-99.

Throughout the first section of the passacaglia the ostinato is presented unaltered. In the second section, the ostinato theme is also presented unaltered throughout with a short interruption of free developmental material following statement six.

1.2.3 S. Barber (1910 ——)

The finale of Barber's Symphony no. 1 (1936) is a traditional passacaglia. The six measure ostinato theme in triple meter is stated thirteen times with only the slightest rhythmic alteration in the twelfth and thirteenth statements.

The accompaniment consists of themes previously heard during the course of the symphony.

Ex. 8: S. Barber, Symphony no. 1,[16] score number 42, mm. 1-6 (ostinato theme)



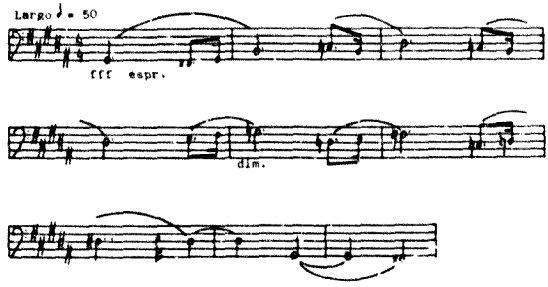
1.2.4 D. Shostakovich (1906 ——)

Movement four, the penultimate movement of Shostakovich's Symphony no. 8, Op. 65 (1943), takes the form of a traditional passacaglia. The nine measure ostinato theme is stated twelve times in its exact form. The initial presentation is strong and forceful, but thereafter it is always stated in the extreme bass register with a very low dynamic level.

---

[16] S. Barber, Symphony no. 1 (1936), study score (New York: Schirmer, 1943), p. 84.

Ex. 9: D. Shostakovich, Symphony no. 8,[17] IV, mm. 3-12 (ostinato theme)

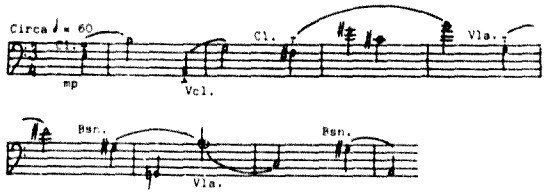


1.2.5 I. Stravinsky (1882-1971)

In Stravinsky's Septet (1953), the slow passacaglia functions as a stabilizing movement between the two faster outer movements.

The varied textures of this passacaglia are built almost exclusively from the ostinato theme itself. According to Stein, every note of every part is thematic, apart from a two part counterpoint in the first, fourth and seventh variations which is not derived from the ostinato theme.[18]

Ex. 10: I. Stravinsky, Septet,[19] II, mm. 1-8 (ostinato theme)



---

[17] D. Shostakovich, Symphony no. 8, Op. 65, pocket score (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf, 1947), pp. 109-110.

[18] E. Stein, "Stravinsky's Septet," *Tempo*, 31 (1954), p. 7.

[19] I. Stravinsky, Septet (1953), full score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1953), p. 12.

The use of an eight measure theme, triple metre and a predominantly trochaic rhythmic pattern are all traditional features.

An unusual feature of the opening statement is the use of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, that is, the motives are distributed amongst the different instruments. This same type of motive distribution also occurs in the final statement of the ostinato theme. While Stravinsky has followed Bach's precedent of introducing the ostinato theme unaccompanied, nevertheless, the constantly changing timbre of the ostinato tends to weaken the coherency of the line.

Another interesting feature of the opening statement is the wide leaps over which the intervals are stretched, encompassing more than two octaves.

In the variations which follow, the ostinato theme is mainly confined to the bass register, and above it

> ... the upper parts form canons which, however, do not adhere to the theme's rhythm and intervals, but only to the sequence of its notes. The canons are of *many* kinds, at various intervals, by inversion, retrograde motion and inversion of the retrogression; in fact, Strawinsky's theme is treated in many ways like Schoenberg's basic sets of twelve notes.[20]

This close relationship between the ostinato theme and the accompanying material shows a parallel with Schoenberg's passacaglia of "Nacht" from *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21 (1912), and demonstrates a tremendous economy of resources.

The ostinato theme is treated as a series of pitches rather than of specific intervals. The original rhythm of the theme is adhered to throughout, with the exception of the final two variations which see some slight rhythmic changes. Nevertheless, despite this adherence to the pitches and rhythm of the ostinato theme, it lacks the coherence of line which is a feature of those themes which retain a specific intervallic structure, and, in this respect, one can see here a loosening of the bonds of the traditional passacaglia.

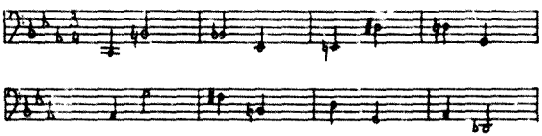
---

[20] Stein, "Stravinsky's Septet," p. 7.

1.2.6 J. Joubert (1927 ——)

The passacaglia of Joubert's Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 35 (1963) is of the traditional type. The eight measure ostinato theme is in the traditional triple metre, but substitutes the trochaic metre so popular in Baroque passacaglias with an iambic metre which is used consistently throughout the theme.

Ex. 11: J. Joubert, Passacaglia and Fugue,[21] mm. 1-8 (ostinato theme)



In this work for organ, the ostinato theme is retained, with only the slightest modifications, throughout all thirteen variations. He has adopted Bach's plan of coupling a passacaglia with a fugue.

1.3 FREE PASSACAGLIAS

At the same time that Reger produced his Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 96 (1906) for two pianos, and his Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 127 (1913) for organ in which he followed the traditional passacaglia form and was strongly influenced by Bach's Passacaglia in C minor in particular, interesting new methods were being developed by the Viennese composers A. Schoenberg, A. Webern and A. Berg.

1.3.1 A. Webern (1883-1945)

Webern's Passacaglia, Op. 1 (1906) appeared slightly before Schoenberg's introduction of free atonality, and fifteen years before his introduction of the serial method.

At the time of the composition of this passacaglia, Webern had just completed his formal studies with Schoenberg. In view of the

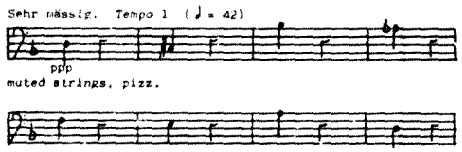
---

[21] J. Joubert, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 35 (London: Novello, 1963), p. 1.

generally acknowledged influence of Brahms on Schoenberg and the fact that Schoenberg laid great emphasis on the analysis of the works of Brahms in his teaching, it seems possible that Webern may have taken the finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony as his starting point. However, he in no way copied his model, and, in fact, developed the form in a highly personal way.

Webern's writing in this passacaglia is tonal and expressive in the post-Romantic idiom. He draws from the traditional passacaglia and, at the same time, introduces many progressive elements. He follows tradition in using an eight measure ostinato theme, however, the duple metre is a break with the traditional triple metre of Baroque passacaglias. The ostinato theme is tonal, both beginning and ending on the tonic, and outlines D minor. It opens with the harmonic progression I-V^6, and ends with the strong cadential formula II-V-I.

Ex. 12: A. Webern, Passacaglia,[22] mm. 1-8
(ostinato theme)



An interesting feature of this ostinato theme is its use of silence in the second half of each measure. The use of silence later became an integral aspect of Webern's style.

Webern's adoption of traditional elements can be seen not only in his use of an eight measure theme, but also in the continuousness of the variations, and the retention of the identity of the ostinato theme at least in the early stages of the composition. Furthermore, he borrows the plan of J.S. Bach's Chaconne for solo violin (BWV 1004) of contrasting two sections in the minor mode with a central section in the major mode.

---

[22] A. Webern, Passacaglia, Op. 1 (Vienna: Universal, 1950), p. 1.

Nevertheless, the work presages a new freedom within the passacaglia form because

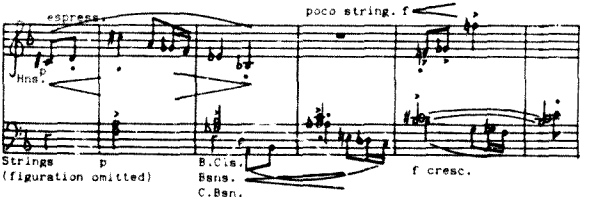
a) the constituent notes of the theme are sometimes dispersed in the harmony so that the theme's coherence as a line is undermined;

b) in the later stages of the passacaglia, the theme becomes imperceptible apart from motivic references to it.

Such departures from traditional practice foreshadowed a new type of passacaglia writing, which could be described as the *free passacaglia*.

The first section in D minor, that is, the theme plus the first eleven variations (mm. 1-104) is marked by a contrapuntal vitality. While in many of these variations, the theme appears intact, nevertheless, alongside this conventional approach, there are several examples of a greater freedom. In variation six (mm. 40-48), for example, the theme disappears as a line, and is replaced by imitating figures which allude to it from time to time.

Ex. 13: A Webern, Passacaglia,[23] mm. 49^{3}-54^{1}
(variation six; theme notes are marked *)

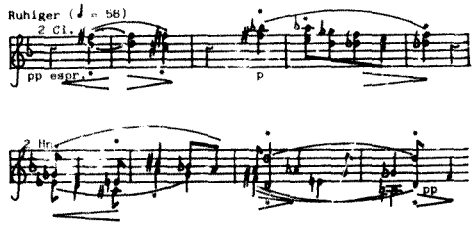


Other examples of the breaking up of the line of the ostinato theme occur in variations nine and ten.

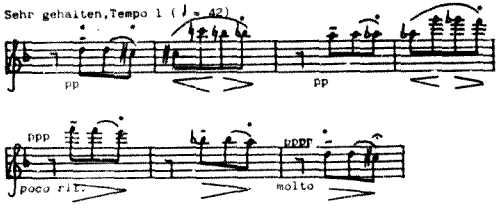
---

[23] Webern, pp. 5-6

Ex. 14: A. Webern, Passacaglia,[24] mm. 81-89
(variation nine; theme notes are marked *)



Ex. 15: A. Webern, Passacaglia,[25] mm. 90-96
(variation ten; theme notes are marked *)



The second section consists of a brief interlude in D major (variations twelve to fifteen). Here, the theme is generally presented in a straightforward manner, the only exception being at the opening of variation twelve (m. 105), where it is divided between solo cello and first violin.

At the opening of the third section (variation sixteen, m. 137) the theme appears in its original form, only slightly altered in that the rests now occur on the first beats, and the notes of the theme occur on the second beats.

From this point, however, Webern treats the theme with ever-increasing freedom, which includes chromatic alteration of the theme while moving from part to part (variations seventeen -

---

[24] Webern, pp. 13-14.

[25] Webern, pp. 14-15.

English horn and oboe; eighteen - flute and clarinet; nineteen - cello and bass; twenty - trombones), incomplete appearance of the theme (variation twenty one), fragmentation of the theme (variations twenty two to twenty four). Thereafter, the theme becomes imperceptible.

In such licences as these, Webern anticipates the new twentieth century design of the *free passacaglia*. His suggestion of this form in his Passacaglia, Op. 1, is mainly confined to the final section of the work. However, more complete examples were soon to appear in Schoenberg's "Nacht" from *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) as well as Berg's passacaglia in Act I, scene iv of *Wozzeck* (1917-1922).

1.3.2 A. Schoenberg (1874-1951)

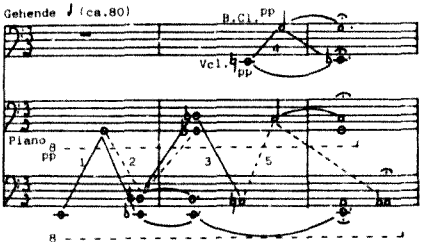
Pierrot Lunaire, Op. 21 (1912), is an atonal work scored for chamber orchestra and *Sprechstimme*. Number eight "Nacht", bears the subtitle "Passacaglia". It marks the beginning of the second of the three sections into which the twenty one movements are divided.

From the outset, it is obvious that this is not a traditional passacaglia. The ostinato theme consists, not of the traditional phrase or pair of phrases, but of a three note motive. This motive is extensively changed during the course of the passacaglia, and both its original and modified forms permeate the entire texture including the *Sprechstimme*.

Even in this extremely experimental passacaglia, however, some traditional elements are retained in the early stages, in that the ostinato motive appears initially, following the introduction, in the bass for several statements beginning on the same fundamental note, and this engenders a certain harmonic repetitiveness often found in earlier passacaglias. Nevertheless, the extreme brevity of the ostinato theme, as well as the atonal and freely dissonant idiom are unprecedented in the history of the passacaglia.

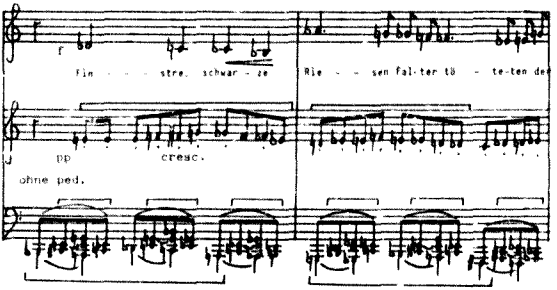
The treatment of the ostinato theme is marked by contrapuntal intricacy throughout and intensive development of the basic motive. As an example, one may cite the initial appearances of the ostinato motive, consisting of five interlocked stretto statements.

Ex. 16: A. Schoenberg, "Nacht,"[26] mm. 1-3 mm. 1-3 (ostinato theme)



Much of the accompanying material is also based on the three note ostinato motive, and often consists of figuration around the intervals of a minor third and a major third on which the ostinato motive is based. The following excerpt demonstrates the extent to which the ostinato motive permeates the entire fabric.

Ex. 17: A. Schoenberg, "Nacht,"[27] mm. 14-15



The unprecedented features of this passacaglia include its renunciation of tonality, its highly dissonant idiom, its use of *Sprechstimme*, and, above all, its freedom of form. This freedom is, according to Nelson, "... so complete as to make the piece

---

[26] A. Schoenberg, "Nacht," from *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21, study score (Vienna: Universal, 1941), p. 26.

[27] Schoenberg, p. 27.

more truly a set of free variations than a passacaglia in the accepted sense".[28]

1.3.3 A. Berg (1885-1935)

1.3.3.1 "Hier ist Friede" from *Fünf Orchesterlieder*, Op. 5 (1912)

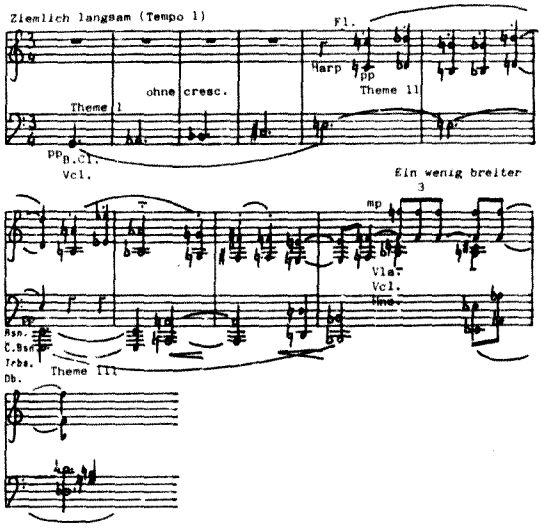
This atonal song cycle dates from 1912. The fifth and final song is a rather sombre passacaglia written in the same year as the passacaglia of "Nacht" from Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*.

This passacaglia is unusual in that it may be regarded as being built on three distinct themes. The first theme, which occurs initially in the bass, is an ascending five note theme. The second theme is generally considered to be the first twelve note theme written by any of the three composers of the Second Viennese School. It is rhythmically more active than both the first and third themes. The third theme, like the first, has a rising contour, and is dominated by the interval of a perfect fourth.

---

[28] R.U. Nelson, "Schoenberg's Variation Seminar," *Musical Quarterly*, 1, No. 2 (1964), p. 147.

Ex. 18: A. Berg, "Hier ist Friede,"[29] mm. 1-11
(ostinato themes)



This use of multiple themes is an indication of a radical departure from the traditional, monothematic passacaglia. A further break with tradition is Berg's failure to establish a genuine thematic ostinato at any point in this song. He does not present the themes, either singly or combined, in any rigorously ordered recurrence. Nelson sees him as combining the themes "... into a rather loose five-measure structure that is defined variously - now by one theme, now by another, now by combined themes".[30]

---

[29] A. Berg, "Hier ist Friede," from *Fünf Orchesterlieder*, Op. 4, study score (Vienna: Universal, 1953), p. 20.

[30] R.U. Nelson, "Form and Fancy in the Variations of Berg," *Music Review*, 31 (1970), p. 56.

It is perhaps the recurrence of this comparatively free structure rather than the constant presence of any particular theme or combination of themes, that justifies this song being called a passacaglia.

Nelson goes still further and calls it a "fugal passacaglia" referring to "its fugue-like use of multiple themes, to their initially staggered entrances, and to their subsequent complex interpenetration".[31]

Despite this passacaglia's atonal idiom, it is in no way a serial piece, as Berg uses the twelve note subject as a theme and not as a row.

It is possible that Britten, in the passacaglia of his Violin Concerto, Op. 15, 1939, was influenced by Berg's crossing of the two forms of passacaglia and fugue, in the initial presentation of the ostinato theme in a fugato exposition (see Chapter 3).

1.3.3.2 *Wozzeck*, Op. 7 (1917-1922)

Act I, scene iv of this opera is a passacaglia. The ostinato theme is symbolic of the Doctor's obsession with achieving immortality through his dietary experiments. The ostinato theme consists of all twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

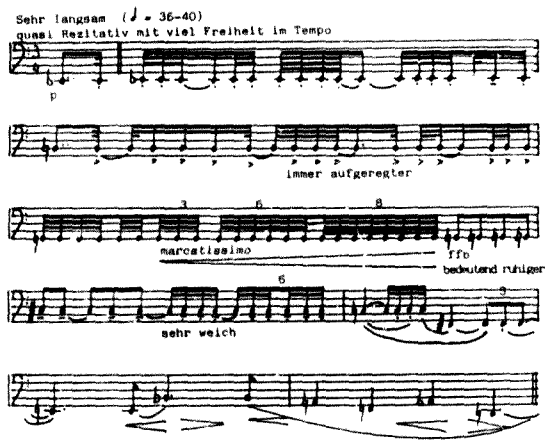
It is possible that in his use of traditional forms in the first two acts of this opera Berg was discovering the role which traditional forms and traditional stylistic details could play in restoring the possibility of coherent large-scale structure which the dissolution of the classical tonal system had destroyed.

Initially, the ostinato theme, which, like the second theme in "Hier ist Friede" from *Fünf Orchesterlieder*, is a twelve note theme, is presented in a recitative setting by the cellos over seven measures. The theme begins on the tonic note E flat and the last three notes outline the dominant seventh of E flat (with root omitted).

---

[31] Nelson, "Variations of Berg," p. 56.

Ex. 19: A. Berg, *Wozzeck*,[32] 1, iv, mm. 1-7 (ostinato theme)



In this passacaglia, Berg adopts liberties far in excess of those he introduced in "Hier ist Friede". There, although his use of multiple themes was unprecedented, he nevertheless retained the melodic and rhythmic contour of each. In the passacaglia from *Wozzeck*, however, the theme's melodic and rhythmic contours are often totally disregarded. Despite the rhythmic freedom, the ostinato is contained within seven measures throughout the first eighteen variations, apart from variations seven, ten, twelve and fifteen where the ostinato is reduced to a single measure containing seven quarter notes. This strictness of rhythmic units is counterbalanced by a freedom of tempo. There is a change of tempo for almost every variation.

Berg has combined both strict and free elements in this passacaglia, with the strict elements appearing in the early stages and the free elements becoming more apparent as the piece

---

[32] A. Berg, *Wozzeck*, study score (Vienna: Universal, 1955), pp. 110-111.

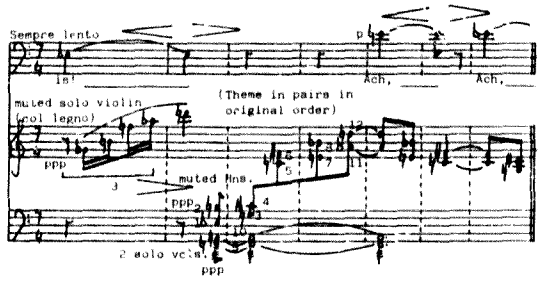
progresses. Nelson states that Berg's "... free passacaglia in *Wozzeck* is the first important, large-scale example of the new genre, a worthy successor of Schönberg's "Nacht" in *Pierrot Lunaire*".[33]

An interesting feature of this passacaglia is that the notes of the theme are sometimes divided up with some occurring in the melodic line while others occur in vertical pairs.

This combination of the line principle with the chord principle was already apparent in Bach's Passacaglia where he sometimes used the notes of the ostinato to function as the roots of arpeggiated chords. Here, however, Berg takes it a step further and combines the notes of the ostinato in pairs, a procedure which was not possible within the harmonic and tonal restrictions of the Baroque period.

Berg adopts many liberties in the treatment of his theme. The earliest variations are the strictest. During the first three variations, the line of the ostinato theme is preserved intact. Gradually, however, the coherence of the theme as a line is undermined and eventually becomes rather obscure. In variation five, the simultaneous sounding of portions of the series appears for the first time. This device attains an incredible symmetry in variation seven.

Ex. 20: A. Berg, *Wozzeck*,[34] I, iv, mm. 49-55 (variation seven)

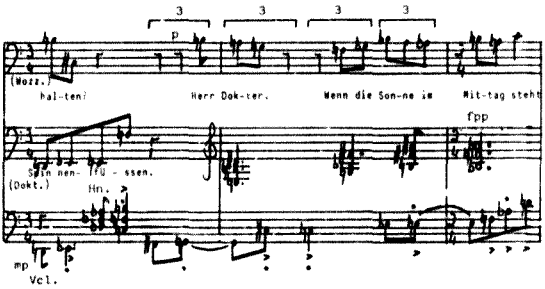


[33] Nelson, "Variations of Berg," p. 59.

[34] Berg, *Wozzeck*, p. 128.

A further interesting feature is Berg's quick shifting of the ostinato theme from one part to another within a single variation. As an extreme form of this technique, Berg divides up the notes of the theme persistently and irregularly, and at the same time, places them in new octave registers. An example of this occurs in variation nine.

Ex. 21: A. Berg, *Wozzeck*,[35] I, iv, mm. 63-65
(variation nine; theme notes are marked *)



The result of such liberties in the handling of the ostinato theme is that the line or structure of the theme is transformed so that it is no longer easily perceptible.

Nelson sees Berg's writing as being "... at the opposite pole from that of the classical passacaglia, even though his writing has great inner logic and consistency".[36]

He goes on to say that

> Even today his handling is atypical. For to find a comparable freedom in subsequent free passacaglias one must turn to isolated examples from the serial composers, such as Dallapiccola's *Chaconne, Intermezzo and Adagio* for solo cello; or Searle's *Passacagliette In Nomine Arnold Schoenberg* for string quartet. Most other writers of free passacaglias have shown a more conservative attitude, either by incorporating sections where the theme is followed strictly, as in the Chaconne from Petrasse's Partita for Orchestra; or by elaborating the theme through the technique of motivic development and theme transformation as in the Passacaglia from Vaughan Williams' Fifth Symphony.[36]

---

[35] Berg, *Wozzeck*, p. 130.

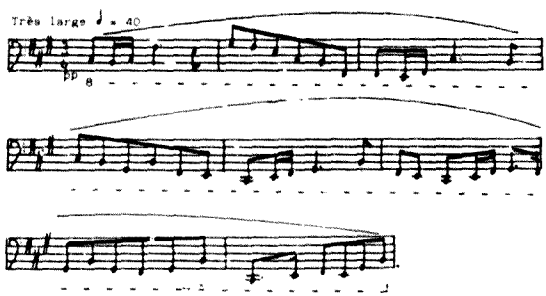
[36] Nelson, "Variations of Berg," p. 60.

A possible reason for the free treatment of the passacaglia on the part of the Viennese composers was that they were opposed to the principle of repetition as such. Thus, their passacaglia variations emphasize the element of change rather than of repetition. The repetition becomes less obvious, but nevertheless remains the cohesive and unifying force. They tend to emphasize motivic development in which unity and cohesion is achieved through the relationship to the fundamental material, as was the case in the late works of Beethoven and Brahms.

1.3.4 M. Ravel (1875-1937)

There are also examples of free passacaglias written by composers outside the Viennese school. The third movement passacaglia of Ravel's Piano Trio (1914), written two years after Schoenberg's revolutionary *Pierrot Lunaire*, has an interesting combination of strict and free elements. The eight measure ostinato theme is stated initially by the piano in the bass register. The second and third statements are by the cello and violin respectively, so that the ostinato theme moves by stages from the bass register to the upper registers.

Ex. 22: M. Ravel, Piano Trio,[37] III, mm. 1-8
(ostinato theme)

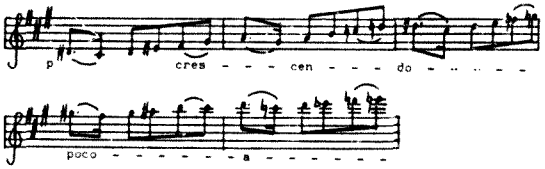


[37] M. Ravel, Piano Trio (1914), study score (Paris: Durand, 1915), p. 21.

This ostinato theme has a distinctive melodic and rhythmic character. An interesting feature is that once the theme has moved up into the higher registers, the accompaniment has a preponderance of trochaic rhythm (so characteristic of the ostinato themes of the Baroque) especially in variations three to six.

The ostinato theme is never abandoned entirely at any stage during this passacaglia, nevertheless, from statement three to statement eight, and again in statements ten and eleven, it is not present in its original form, and there is frequent repetition of motives as well as sequential treatment. In variation five, for example, the first four notes of the ostinato theme are transposed, rhythmically altered and treated sequentially, with the upward leap of a perfect fourth filled in with stepwise movement.

Ex. 23: M. Ravel, Piano Trio,[38] III, mm. 41-45 (variation five)



Having reached the upper registers in variation two, the ostinato remains there until the end of variation six, when it begins its descent back to the bass register for the final variation.

The traditional elements in this passacaglia are, therefore, the eight measure theme, triple metre and a constant ostinato length. The progressive traits include the deviation from the original outlines of the ostinato theme, and the repetition and sequential treatment of motives of the theme. Thus, the ostinato theme itself is subjected to a certain amount of variation.

---

[38] Ravel, pp. 22-23.

1.3.5 R. Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

A much later example of a free passacaglia within a tonal context is the fourth movement of the Fifth Symphony (1938-1943) by Vaughan Williams.

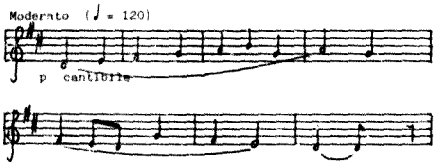
A variety of approaches to thematic handling appear. The seven measure ostinato is in the traditional triple metre.

Ex. 24: R. Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 5,[39] IV, mm. 1-7 (ostinato theme)



The counter-theme is closely related to the ostinato theme.

Ex. 25: R. Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 5,[40] IV, mm. 1-7 (counter-theme)



---

[39] R. Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 5 (1938-1943), pocket score (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 90.

[40] Vaughan Williams, pp. 90-91.

Both these themes are flexible and capable of growth and development.

After ten statements of the ostinato, most of which are ornamented and rhythmically altered (and, as a result, some of them are a measure or two longer or shorter than the original presentation of the ostinato), the music begins to expand more freely. The ostinato theme becomes less perceptible and is itself subjected to variation. It is presented in a scherzo-like character, it is fragmented, and it is involved in contrapuntal working out.

Thus, this passacaglia presents both the technique of variation over the ostinato as well as that of variation of the ostinato theme itself in a context in which it becomes increasingly obscure.

1.4 CONCLUSION

The above examination of several twentieth-century passacaglias has revealed that there are two main types or tendencies:

a) the "traditional" type, in which the melodic as well as the rhythmic features of the ostinato theme are retained more or less exactly;
b) the "free" type, in which the pitches of the theme may be somewhat obscured by motivic development, chromatic alteration, shifting from part to part, fragmentation, distribution within the harmony. The rhythmic values may also be freely varied.

Differences between twentieth-century passacaglias and the earlier passacaglias include the following:

1) the theme lengths are not restricted to four or eight measures;
2) triple metre is not always used;

3) the passacaglia is no longer in general restricted to the minor mode;
4) there are often deviations from the original starting tempo;
5) the theme invades the upper registers more frequently;
6) stock basses are not used (see Appendix A).

The conspicuously frequent use of the passacaglia in the twentieth century signifies a new insight into the importance of the constructive elements of form at a time when tonality can no longer guarantee formal cohesion.

Stein has made the following observation on the use of the passacaglia in the twentieth century:

> The aesthetic constructive principle of the passacaglia is that of repetition, a repetition which provides continuity, coherence, order and symmetry. In the twentieth century these elements become the more sought after in order to compensate for the lack of that organization which was previously provided by tonality and adherence to established forms.[41]

Delone echoes this sentiment:

> The appeal of ostinato technique to twentieth-century composers ... lies in part in the need for unity created by the virtual abandonment of functional chord progressions to shape phrases and define tonality. Secondly, many composers particularly those associated with neo-classicism, have found the use of ostinato

[41] Stein, *Structure and Style*, p. 43.

devices of the passacaglia type quite compatible with their stylistic and aesthetic values; many composers of the 1930's and '40's turned to ostinato techniques almost as receptively as had Baroque and Renaissance composers.[42]

---

[42] R.P. Delone, "Timbre and Texture in Twentieth-Century Music," in *Aspects of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed. G.W. Wittlich (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), p. 123.

CHAPTER 2

PIANO CONCERTO, OP. 13, 1938, revised 1945

1. BACKGROUND

The Piano Concerto, dedicated to Lennox Berkeley, was completed on 26 July 1938. Britten himself gave the first performance on 18 August 1938 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Henry Woods in the Queen's Hall, London.

The Concerto consists of four character movements:

- Toccata - Allegro molto e con brio
- Waltz - Allegretto
- Impromptu [1] - Andante lento
- March - Allegro moderato

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

This ostinato theme is presented in the mid-range for most of the passacaglia. In only two of the eight statements does it descend to the low registers (statements four and six).

2.1.1 Sequence

The descending passages of this ostinato theme are characterized melodically by the sequential use of a falling augmented second/minor third, repeated on each occasion a major third/diminished fourth lower.

Rhythmically there is also a very prominent use of sequence. The rhythmic pattern throughout is , the only deviation occurring at the end of each of the two phrases where a half note substitutes for the rhythmic pattern.

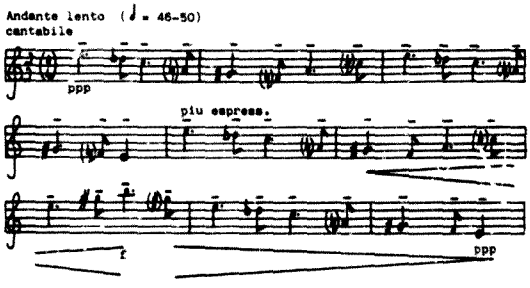
Both rhythmically and melodically, the second phrase is an exact repetition of the first, apart from a short interpolation ($7\frac{4}{8}$ - $7\frac{8}{8}$).

---

[1] In the original version of 1938, the Concerto consisted of the following movements: Toccata, Waltz, Recitative and Aria, March. In the revision of 1945, Britten substituted an Impromptu in the form of a passacaglia as the third movement.

Furthermore, in the first phrase, apart from the final beat, the third and fourth measures are rhythmically and melodically identical with the first and second measures. The same is also true of the second phrase which, however, deviates slightly by way of the central interpolation.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [2]



2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

The ostinato theme is dominated by minor third and semitone movement. This predominance of certain intervals together with the strong similarity between each of the phrases, and, in addition, the repetition within the phrases, makes for a highly unified theme structure.

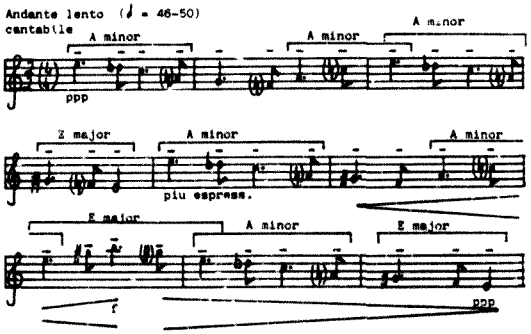
2.1.3 Chordal influence

Triad influence in this ostinato theme is strong. The triad of A minor is clearly outlined several times, elaborated on occasions with chromatic passing notes. Furthermore, the triad of E major is outlined once in its entirety, and on two occasions it appears without the fifth.

---

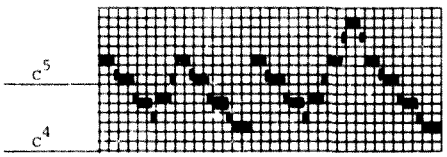
[2] B. Britten, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 13, revised edition, pocket score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1945), p. 102.

Ex. 2: Triad structure of ostinato theme [3]



2.1.4 Contour

Ex. 3: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class) [4]

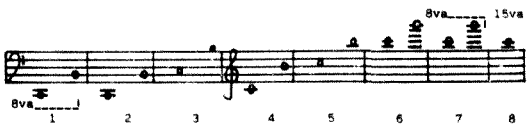


Each of the two phrases of the ostinato theme presents the profile of a decline followed by an arch. In the second phrase, the peak of the arch is more prominent, rising as it does to a higher pitch level and occurring slightly later than is the case in phrase one. Both the

---

[3] Britten, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, p . 102.

[4] The registers throughout this thesis have been numbered as follows:



higher pitch level and the tension created by the longer time-span required to reach it, make the peak of the second rise the overall highpoint of the melodic contour.

I choose to regard the above contour as two phrases each representing a decline followed by an arch, rather than as two phrases each representing an inverse arch followed by a decline. My reason for this choice is that, in the case of an inverse arch followed by a decline, the lowpoint of the arch in both phrases would be rhythmically weak. On the other hand, if each phrase is regarded as a decline followed by an arch, the highpoint of the arch falls in a rhythmically strong position in both phrases.

There is a fairly wide interval, namely a perfect octave, between the first and last notes of the ostinato theme. This wide interval is created by the declining contour prior to the rise of the arch in each phrase.

The fact that the ostinato theme begins and ends on the same pitch class allows for smooth repetition. The rhythmic pause, however, at the end of each of the phrases creates a strongly sectional effect.

The total range-span of the ostinato theme is fairly wide — an octave plus a perfect fifth.

2.1.5 Length

The nine measure ostinato theme consists of two phrases. The second phrase is slightly longer than the first (4 + 5). This theme is therefore slightly longer than the favoured four or eight measures of the Baroque ostinato themes.

There are eight statements of the ostinato theme.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

This ostinato theme is highly chromatic. Nevertheless, it does remain tonally orientated with E as the tonal centre.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

The metre is 2/2 or 4/4, with the metronome marking of "Andante lento (♩ = 46-50)". At no point is there any change in the metre in which the ostinato theme is presented. The initial tempo of the theme is retained throughout the passacaglia, apart from a slight quickening in statement six of the ostinato theme.

2.1.8 Rhythm

The pattern ♩ ♪ is adhered to rigidly throughout the theme apart from the final beat of each of the two phrases. This fairly active rhythm can possibly be ascribed to the fact that this is a mid-range and not a low-range ostinato.

The strict adherence to the above rhythmic pattern creates a feeling of calm and predictability which helps to counteract the tremendous tension created by the high degree of melodic chromaticism.

2.1.9 Melodic tension

The ostinato theme both begins and ends on the tonic. It is therefore a self-contained entity. Within the ostinato, however, the predominant movement by minor thirds and semitones creates considerable melodic tension due to the resulting chromatic movement.

2.1.10 Derivation

This ostinato theme is not derived from any material previously used in this Concerto.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement of the ostinato theme is accompanied. In this case, however, the accompaniment is not contrapuntal in the sense of setting another theme or counterpoint against the ostinato, but is instead, a harmonization of the ostinato itself.

The harmonized first statement setting for solo piano sets the first statement apart and gives it the quality of a theme being presented for subsequent variation.

2.2.2 Variations in length

Very slight lengthening of the final note of the ostinato occurs in statements three and four. However, the most significant variations in length occur in statements seven and eight. In statement seven, the ostinato is abandoned after the first beat of the sixth measure. Statement eight, the final statement, by the use of frequent long, sustained notes spreads the ostinato over fourteen measures, despite

the omission of two measures (4^3-6^2). This spreading out of the ostinato in the final statement serves as a method of broadening as the passacaglia nears its conclusion.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

Ex. 4: Tone colour of ostinato

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Pno.	Cl. Bsn. Hn. Vlas. Vcls.	Picc. Ob. Vlns.	Bsns. Vcls. Dbs.	Harp Vlns.	Dbs. (pizz.)	Tbns.	Vlns.

There is a change of tone colour for each statement of the ostinato theme, and at no point is the instrumentation repeated. The second statement shows a crescendo over the first statement. Thereafter, however, in statement three, there is a drop in density and this is followed by a formal arch profile which is supported by the instrumentation of the ostinato theme.

In statement six, the use of pizzicato articulation in the double basses is an additional source of colour as the peak of the arch is approached.

2.2.4 Tempo changes

There are no abrupt tempo changes in this passacaglia. There is a gradual increase in speed in statement six as the peak of the arch is approached, but the reduction of speed in the final measure of this statement allows statement seven, which forms the peak of the arch, to assume the original tempo.

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

At no point in this passacaglia is the ostinato theme fragmented. At the peak of the arch in statement seven, there is a slight drop-out of the theme.

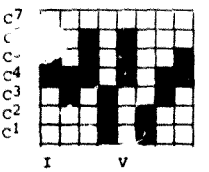
2.2.6 Degree of audibility

The ostinato theme is audible throughout. After occupying the foreground in statements one and two, it moves into the background during the rise

and peak of the arch contour, and moves back to share the foreground with the accompaniment during the antiphonal interplay of the final statement.

2.2.7 Octave register

Ex. 5: Octave register of ostinato



The above illustration shows that the ostinato theme occupies a wide variety of registers during the course of the passacaglia. It is stated initially in the middle register, and thereafter is presented at various stages in all registers, high, middle and low.

Moreover, in only two statements, that is, statements four and six, is the ostinato consistently the lowest sounding part. In statement five the ostinato is at times the lowest sounding part. In the remaining five statements, however, the ostinato is definitely not the lowest sounding part.

This ostinato theme can therefore be described as a full-range ostinato, in that, during the course of the passacaglia, all registers are freely exploited.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are eight statements of the nine measure ostinato theme. However, the short piano cadenzas which separate each statement of the ostinato, lengthen the passacaglia. Excluding the cadenzas, the passacaglia is seventy five measures long.

The overall time-span is 8.'2 minutes. [5]

---

[5] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, with soloist Sviatoslav Richter, cond. Benjamin Britten, English Chamber Orchestra, Decca SXL 6512, 1971.

2.3.2 Sectionalization

This ostinato theme creates a high degree of sectionalization due to the following factors:

- the high incidence of chromaticism within the theme;
- the fact that it both begins and ends on the tonic so that it is a self-contained entity, and no forward propulsion is initiated by the final note of each statement;
- the fact that the individual statements of the theme are separated by piano cadenzas.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

Following the initial statement of the ostinato by the piano, the ostinato is given over to the orchestra for all the subsequent statements, while the piano provides interesting accompanying counterpoint at times reinforced by the orchestra. The piano provides a new counterpoint to the ostinato theme in each variation except the final variation in which Britten brings back previously used counterpoints, that is, those which accompanied statements seven, four, three and two respectively.

An important unifying factor among these various counterpoints is the similarity of rhythm in the counterpoints to statements five, six and seven. The predominant rhythms in each of these counterpoints are as follows:

Statement V : $\frac{12}{8}$

Statement VI : $\frac{12}{8}$

Statement VII : $\frac{12}{8}$

The use of a different counterpoint for each statement of the ostinato reflects the improvizational character inherent in the title "Impromptu" which is assigned to this movement.

Statements two to eight of the ostinato are each preceded by a free passage for the piano which at times anticipates the counterpoint to the following ostinato statement, while at other times is simply an extension of the counterpoint to the previous statement. In the case of the cadenza-like passage preceding statement four of the ostinato, it is unrelated to anything which precedes or follows it.

All the counterpoints are characterized by a conspicuous use of the minor third and semitone intervals which predominate in the ostinato itself.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

In statements two and three of the ostinato, the accompaniment is interwoven both above and below it. During statements four to eight, however, that is, during the course of the arch profile, the accompaniment remains predominantly above the ostinato.

3.2.2 Tone colour

The piano dominates the accompaniment throughout. In the first four variations, that is, statements two to five, the piano has only scant orchestral support. In these variations, therefore, the changing tone colour of the accompaniment is brought about by changes in the octave register of the piano. In variation five, however (statement six), the side drum and timpani add colour to the piano accompaniment. In variation six (statement seven), the piano accompaniment is reinforced by the entire woodwind and string sections as well as the tuba and side drum.

Variations one to four, therefore, use the changing octave registers of the piano to achieve tone colour variation. In variations five and six, at the approach to, and during the peak of the arch, Britten uses the method of additive crescendo of changing tone colours.

It is interesting that during variations one and two (statements two and three), while the piano is relying on changing octave registers to achieve variety of tone colour, the ostinato itself is not confined to low-range instruments and is freely interwoven with the accompaniment.

Ex. 6: Tone colour of accompaniment and ostinato
(* equals reinforcing some of the notes)

	Harp* Db.* Pno.	Db.* Pno.	Pno.	Hn.* Pno.	Db.* Timp.* Pno.	S.D.* Tuba* Strings W.W. Pno.	Strings Pno.
I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Pno.	Cl. Bsn. Hn. Vlas. Vcls.	Picc. Oboe Vlns.	Bsns. Vcls. Dbs.	Harp Vlns.	Dbs.	Tbns.	Vlns.

3.2.3 Texture

Throughout the passacaglia there are marked changes of texture in the piano part for each statement of the ostinato theme. This gives the passacaglia a highly sectional character.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

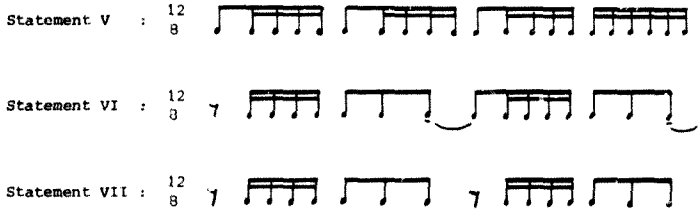
There is no attempt in the accompaniment to disguise the repetitions of the ostinato. On the contrary, the piano cadenzas which separate each appearance of the ostinato serve to emphasize each repetition. Furthermore, the change of counterpoint for each repetition of the ostinato is a further sectionalizing factor.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The relationship of the accompaniment to the ostinato theme is variable. Initially, that is, in the second and third statements of the ostinato, the accompaniment is subdued and the ostinato is very much in the foreground. From statement four on, however, the accompaniment assumes ever increasing significance until the peak of the arch is reached in statement seven. This gradual increase in the significance of the accompaniment is used as a means to create the rise of the arch profile. In the final statement, which represents the decline of the arch, both ostinato theme and accompaniment are on equal terms.

3.3.3 Grouping

Following the change of metre to 12/8 in the accompaniment at the beginning of statement five, there is a strong similarity between the rhythms of statements five, six and seven:



This similarity of rhythms serves to create a feeling of continuity and motion on the rise of the arch profile.

The final statement of the ostinato (statement eight), recalls the counterpoints and rhythms of statements seven, four, three and one respectively. This recurrence of previously-used accompanying material in the final statement is a unifying device which summarizes much of what has gone before and creates a feeling of rounding-off on the decline of the arch profile.

4. MOTION FACTORS

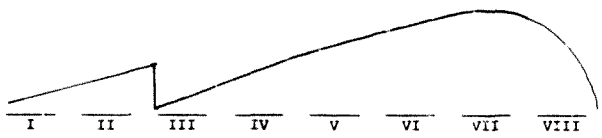
4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

The textural changes occur in stages corresponding with the repetitions of the ostinato. Following the increased textural density in statement two of the ostinato, there is a marked drop in statement three. From statement four on there is a gradual increase in density culminating in the peak of the arch contour in statement seven, after which there is a marked decline in density.

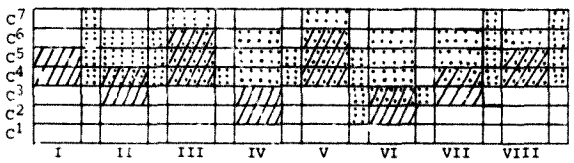
The density, therefore, follows a contour of rise plus arch.

Ex. 7: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 8: Range (= ostinato; = accompaniment)



The above illustration of the range shows that the greatest contrasts in range-span are created during the piano interludes which occur between each of the variations. The result is that the range is subjected to sudden widenings and narrowings which, in some instances, as for example, in the interludes following statements three and six, are extreme. This constant fluctuation of range in the accompaniment is used as a means of creating contrasts of colour.

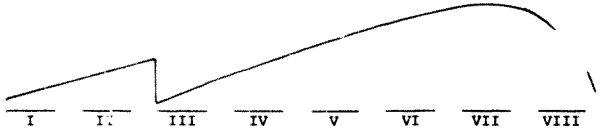
4.1.3 Dynamics

The growth of the dynamics occurs in stages. The stages correspond with the statements of the ostinato. Additional motion is given to the dynamics through the use of dynamic waves within each of the stages. There is a marked drop in the dynamic level immediately following the peak of the rise in statement two. The piano interlude makes a gradual transition from the dynamic level of statement two to the dynamic level of statement three. Statement three represents the lowpoint of the

rising arch profile. From this point, the dynamics rise reaching a peak in statement seven, and dropping off in statement eight for the downward curve of the arch profile.

The dynamics, therefore, follow a rise plus arch contour.

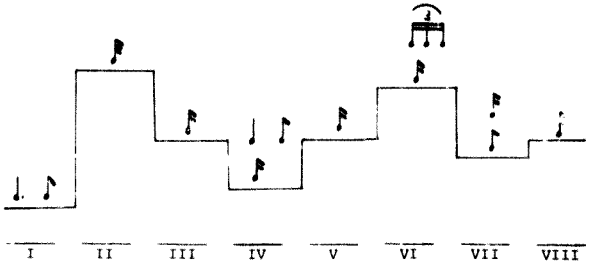
Ex. 9: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes also occur in stages which correspond with the repetitions of the ostinato. The rhythm follows the contour of rise plus arch. The peak of the initial rise is reached in statement two with the highly rhythmically florid piano accompaniment. Statement four represents the lowpoint of the rhythmic arch profile which reaches its peak in statement six. Statement seven, which represents the peak of the overall formal arch profile, sees a slight drop in rhythmic activity at a time when both the density and dynamics are at a highpoint.

Ex. 10: Rhythmic profile



There is an interesting contrast between the marked drop to the slow thoughtful rhythm of the ostinato in statement eight and the antiphonal answers of the piano which change rhythms very rapidly, creating a sense of finality by means of compression.

4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The above discussion of the parameters shows that the density, dynamics and rhythm all follow the contour of rise plus arch, with a slight relaxation in the rhythm at the peak of the overall arch profile. The range, on the other hand, creates colour contrasts and a feeling of motion by constantly changing registers.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

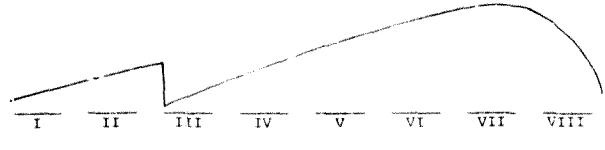
The reversing of the rhythmic values of the ostinato from ♩. 𝅘𝅥𝅯 to 𝅘𝅥𝅯 ♩. and the spreading out of the ostinato by extremely long note values such as 𝅘𝅥𝅯 𝅗𝅥.. 𝅗𝅥. | or 𝅘𝅥𝅯 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥𝅯 𝅗𝅥 | 𝅗𝅥. 𝅘𝅥𝅯 𝅘𝅥𝅯 , has the effect of slowing down the rhythm in the final statement of the ostinato. This effect is heightened by the antiphonal writing for the strings and piano.

Finality is also created by the return of thematic material from the accompaniment of earlier variations in the final statement of the ostinato.

5. FORMAL PLAN

This passacaglia presents the contour of rise plus arch. The rise occurs during the first two statements of the ostinato. Statement three sees the lowpoint of the arch profile which reaches its peak in statement seven. The rise of the arch is thus spread over four statements with the peak of the arch occurring in the following statement (statement seven). The decline of the arch occupies a single statement. This arch profile thus has a late peak.

Ex. 11: Formal profile



The rise plus arch formal profile is supported by the density, dynamics and rhythm.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia is the third movement of a four movement work. It is thus positioned just after the midpoint of the work as a whole. It has a transitional function and leads into the final movement without a pause.

The tonal centres of the four movements are as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

D $\underset{B^{b}}{D_{b}}$ $\underline{E}$ D

CHAPTER 3

VIOLIN CONCERTO, OP. 15, 1939, revised 1950

1. BACKGROUND

Britten's Violin Concerto, dedicated to Henry Boys, was completed in America during the summer of 1939. It was given its first performance in Carnegie Hall, New York, on 27 March 1940, with the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli with soloist Antonio Brosa.

Britten made a slight revision of this work in 1950, and the revised version was first performed by Gimpel and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham at the Royal Festival Hall in London, on 12 December 1951.

The work is in three movements:

- I Moderato con moto (♩ = 80-84)
- II Vivace (♩ = 104)
- II" Passacaglia — andante lento (un poco meno mosso) (♩ = 52-54)

The third movement is a passacaglia and represents Britten's first use of this form. The passacaglia of the Piano Concerto, Op. 13, dates from the revision of 1945.

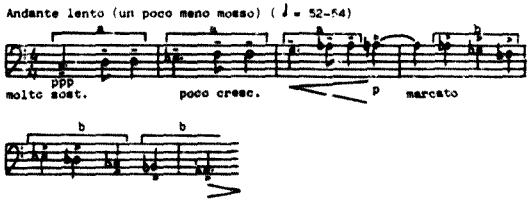
2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 *Sequence*

There is extensive use of sequence in this single phrased ostinato theme The upward curve consists of a threefold repetition of the interval of a rising whole tone, each repetition being a minor third higher than the previous one. The downward curve, on the other hand, consists of a pattern of two whole tones, repeated a perfect fourth lower and followed by a partial sequence again a perfect fourth lower.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme (melodic sequence bracketed) [1]



The rising contour thus consists of an alternation of the intervals of a tone and semitone. The falling contour, on the other hand, consists of an alternation of a semitone followed by two whole tones.

Rhythmic sequence also occurs in measures two and three with the final note of the sequence in measure three contracted from a half note to a quarter note.

2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

The ostinato theme consists entirely of stepwise movement in tones and semitones. It is thus highly chromatic, and this chromaticism is intensified in contrapuntal combination. Nine of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are represented in this theme. The three missing notes are those which constitute the triad of E minor (E G B).

The narrow interval of a major third exists between the final note and the first note of the theme's repetition. This small interval creates smoothness in the repetitions of the theme.

The theme has the narrow range-span of an augmented octave.

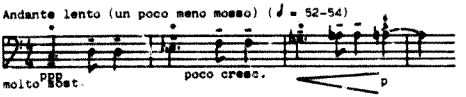
2.1.3 Chordal influence

A diminished seventh chord is outlined on the upward curve of the arch.

---

[1] B. Britten, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 15, pocket score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1940), p. 80.

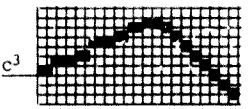
Ex. 2: Upward curve of ostinato theme[2] (notes marked * form part of the diminished seventh chord)



2.1.4 Contour

The ostinato theme has an arch contour which reaches its peak slightly after the midpoint of the theme and thereafter drops to a point slightly below that from which the upward curve was initiated.

Ex. 3: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



2.1.5 Length

Rounding off the length of the ostinato theme to the nearest half measure it is five and a half measures long.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

Although highly chromatic in nature, this ostinato theme seems to centre on D flat minor. A diminished triad on C is outlined by the initial notes of the sequence in measures one to three. The rise culminates on A natural which forms the seventh of the diminished seventh on C. This A natural resolves immediately to A flat, the fifth of the D flat minor triad.

---

[2] Britten, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, p. 80.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

The ostinato is initially presented in simple quadruple metre (4/4). In sections four and five (score numbers 36 and 37), there is a change to simple triple metre (3/4). The march in section seven (score number 39) sees the simple quadruple metre reinstated. However, section eight (score number 41) again reverts to simple triple metre (3/4), and this is retained until six measures before section nine (score number 43) at which point the simple quadruple metre (4/4) returns. The coda in section ten (score number 45) sees a change to 3/2 metre for the remainder of the passacaglia.

The only major tempo change occurs at the beginning of the coda (score number 45) where there is a marked reduction in tempo.

The tempo indication given at the opening of the passacaglia is slow: "Andante lento (un poco meno mosso) (♩ = 52-54)".

2.1.8 Rhythm

The use of syncopation at the peak of the arch contour of this ostinato theme is a tension creating device. An interesting feature of this theme in the first two measures is the activity of the first half of the measure followed by a static second half of the measure.

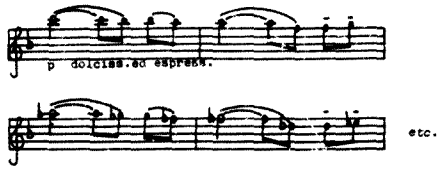
2.1.9 Melodic tension

This ostinato theme ends on the dominant note, A flat. The use of an open-ended theme which ends on the dominant has a very strong effect of forward drive. Melodic tension is also created by the highly chromatic nature of the theme. The semitone and whole tone movement within a framework of D flat minor creates considerable unrest.

2.1.10 Derivation

There is a strong affinity between the scalic preoccupation of the ostinato theme and that of the main theme of the opening movement of the Concerto.

Ex. 4: Main theme of first movement [3]



2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement is overlapped by the violin cadenza which links the passacaglia to the preceding movement. The cadenza, therefore, supplies a counterpoint above the first statement of the ostinato theme. The end of the violin cadenza coincides with the end of the first statement of the ostinato theme. This overlap of the cadenza with the beginning of the passacaglia ensures a very smooth flow into this final movement.

Initially the ostinato theme is presented in a fugato exposition with each statement overlapping the following statement. The opening section, therefore, presents an interesting hybrid between the fugue and the passacaglia. During this exposition, each statement of the ostinato theme is presented a semitone lower than the previous statement.

2.2.2 Variations in length

Britten here uses a flexible theme length, and there are constant fluctuations in the ostinato theme length throughout the passacaglia.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

A very interesting use of tone colour occurs in this passacaglia. Britten does not confine the ostinato theme to any one tone colour within the sections of the passacaglia. The constantly changing tone

---

[3] Britten, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, p. 2.

colours not only from one section to the next, but also within sections, results in a kaleidoscopic effect, which serves both to create vitality and to maintain interest.

The following is a summary of the tone colours used in the ostinato theme:

Section I	
Trombones	Staggered, overlapping entries
Violins & violas	
Trumpet	
Flutes, oboes, clarinets	
Section II (score number 34)	
Cellos	Staggered entries, none of which follows the exact structure of the ostinato theme
Violas	
Violins II	
Violins I	
Section III (score number 35)	
Horns	In alternation, and finally in staggered, overlapping entries to which the trumpets are also added
Flutes, oboes, clarinets	
Section IV (score number 36)	
Cellos, double basses plus Violins 1	In these two successive appearances of the ostinato theme, the double basses and cellos are given the rising contour, while the falling contour is given to the violins I, and violins II and oboe respectively
Cellos, double basses plus Oboes, violins II	
Section V (score number 37)	
Solo violin	There is one entry in this section in which the incomplete rising contour is given to the bassoon and double basses, but the descent reverts to the solo violin

Section VI (score number 38)

Solo violin	The ostinato theme is given to each
Flutes, oboe	of these instruments or combinations
Violins II	of instruments successively
Violins I	
Flutes, oboes	
Cellos and double basses	

Section VII (score number 39)

Trumpets and timpani (rising)	The ostinato theme is given to each
Horns (falling)	of these instrumerts or combinations
Trombones	of instruments successively

Section VIII (score number 41)

Bassoon(s)	The ostinato theme is given to each
Horns	of these instruments successively
Violin solo	

Section IX (score number 43)

Bassoons, trombones, tuba,	Following the climax at score
double basses	number 44, the horns take over the
Horns	ostinato theme

Section X (score number 45)

Trombones	The ostinato theme is given to
Violins 1	each of these instruments
Harp	successively

2.2.4 Tempo changes

The tempo is fairly constant throughout the first nine sections. In the coda, however, (section ten, score number 45), there is a marked drop in tempo. This definite slackening of tempo in the coda is used as a means of broadening as the movement and work as a whole reach their conclusion.

2.2.5 Variations in rhythm

Throughout the larger portion of this passacaglia, the ostinato theme is presented in rhythms which differ markedly from those of the original setting. The only use of the theme in its original rhythmic setting occurs in section nine (score number 43).

2.2.6 Variations of the fundamental pitch and intervallic structure

During the course of the passacaglia, the ostinato theme is not restricted to the original fundamental pitch, but each of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale is at some stage used as the fundamental pitch of the ostinato. Even the exact intervallic structure of the theme, that is, the exact succession of tones and semitones, is not retained in subsequent statements of the ostinato theme.

2.2.7 Other variations of the ostinato theme

In addition to the freedom of rhythm, length and fundamental pitch encountered in the treatment of this ostinato theme, another feature is the inversion of the theme. This occurs in section six (score number 38).

Again, however, the inversion is free, not retaining the original intervals or length of the theme.

2.2.8 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

At no point during this passacaglia is the ostinato theme totally absent. There is, however, a fairly extensive use of theme fragmentation, as, for example, in sections three (score number 35) and ten (score number 45).

This passacaglia exhibits considerable freedom and licence in the use of the ostinato theme. While the overall arch contour of the ostinato is retained, the actual intervals rarely coincide with those of the opening statement.

Furthermore, there are frequent extensions and abridgements to the rising and falling contours of the arch.

2.2.9 Degree of audibility

Despite the freedom with which the ostinato theme is treated, it remains audible throughout apart from section two (score number 34). Here, the drastic change of metre and the use of tremolo strings completely

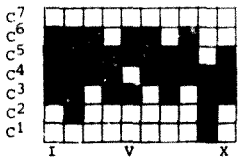
disguise the presence of the ostinato which is also subjected to variations in length.

2.2.10 Octave register

As is the case with the tone colour, there are constant fluctuations of octave register not only from one section to the next, but also within sections.

The following diagram illustrates the octave registers used for the ostinato in each section, and shows the predominance of middle and high register placement.

Ex. 5: Octave register of ostinato



The free exploitation of all registers by the ostinato qualifies it to be described as a full-range ostinato.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

It is difficult to estimate the effect of the length of this ostinato theme (five and a half measures) on the length of the passacaglia as a whole. The great freedom of length in the repetitions of the ostinato, the frequent overlapping of entries, as well as fragmentation of the ostinato all obscure the influence of the ostinato length on the overall length of the movement.

The overall length of this passacaglia is two hundred and eleven measures. The overall time-span is 13.13 minutes. [4]

---

[4] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, with soloist Mark Lubotsky, cond. Benjamin Britten, English Chamber Orchestra, Decca SXL 6512, 1971.

2.3.2 Sectionalization

The considerable use of chromaticism in this ostinato theme makes it highly distinctive and, therefore, it tends to have a highly sectional effect. However, the constant fluctuations in length, rhythm, tone colour, octave register and audibility result in a varying pattern of sectionalization.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

This passacaglia divides itself into ten sections each of which presents a specific treatment of the ostinato theme. It therefore presents the novel situation of variations of the ostinato theme itself, as well as variations of the settings of the ostinato theme.

The accompanying material does not rise to the status of a theme, but instead consists of melodic motives. A new accompanying melodic motive is presented for each variation on the ostinato theme with the exception of sections four and five (score numbers 36 and 37). In these two sections, the accompaniment consists of harmonic support.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

In view of the considerable variation of rhythm, length, fundamental pitches, intervallic structure, and tone colour to which this ostinato theme is subjected, there is not a total reliance on the accompaniment to provide the element of variation as is usually the case in a passacaglia.

3.2.1 Octave register

Throughout this passacaglia, the accompaniment is consistently neither above nor below the ostinato theme. Instead, it tends to be interwoven around it. Furthermore, the register of the accompaniment does not remain constant, but tends to change as does the register of the ostinato theme itself.

3.2.2 Tone colour

As is the case with the tone colour of the ostinato theme which changes not only from one section to the next, but also within sections, so the

tone colour of the accompaniment changes with each change of colour in the ostinato. These constantly changing tone colours create tremendous vitality and at the same time impart a feeling of forward motion.

3.2.3 Texture

Just as the tone colour of the accompaniment changes from one section to the next as well as within sections, so the texture also undergoes similar changes. These frequent changes in tone colour and texture create an irregular pattern of growth.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

While within sections, the accompaniment usually overlaps statements of the ostinato theme, nevertheless, a strong feeling of sectionalization arises from the change of accompanying motive for each new variation of the ostinato theme. Thus, each section presents both a new variation on the ostinato theme, as well as a new accompanying motive. As a result, there is a highly sectional effect.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

Due to the fact that the prime source of variation in this passacaglia is the ostinato theme itself, it is not surprising that, for the most part, the ostinato theme dominates the accompaniment (sections one, four, five, six and eight). In the remaining sections (apart from section two in which the ostinato theme is in the background), the ostinato theme and accompaniment share a fairly equal status.

3.3.3 Grouping

Grouping in this passacaglia occurs within sections rather than between sections. Within each section grouping is achieved by a consistent treatment of the ostinato theme throughout, and also the use of a single melodic motive (sometimes with slight variation) in the accompaniment. The greatest unifying factor in this passacaglia is the prominence of the ostinato theme almost throughout which, although it appears in various guises, is always clearly recognizable, and is the bridge which spans all the various sections.

4. MOTION FACTORS

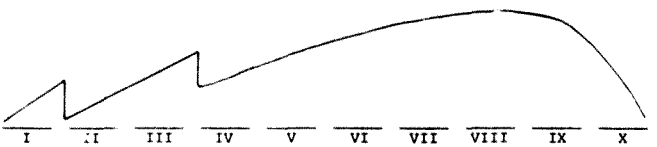
4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

The free fugal exposition which opens this passacaglia has a high density. Following this, in section two, there is a sudden drop in density followed by a slight increase which continues through section three. Section four sees another drop in density. From section five through to section nine, however, there is a steady increase in density followed by a dropping off in section ten.

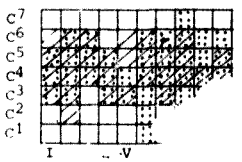
The density, therefore, follows the contour of a double rise plus an arch.

Ex. 6: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 7: Range (▨ = ostinato; ⁝⁝ = accompaniment)



From the above diagrammatic representation of the range of the ostinato and the accompaniment, it is clear that the ostinato is not confined to the lower limits of the range, but is interwoven with the

accompaniment throughout. It also shows a constant shifting in the area of range concentration on the part of the ostinato.

In the accompaniment, however, there is a gradual widening of range on the upward curve of the arch (that is, sections five to eight). The peak of the arch, however, in section nine shows a narrowing in the range of concentration with a slight widening again in section ten on the decline of the arch.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The dynamic changes are made in stages which correspond with each of the ten sections of the passacaglia. Within these longer stages, however, motion is created by pronounced waves of dynamics.

The dynamics follow an upward profile during section one. This is followed by a marked drop at the beginning of section two (score number 34), which is followed by a gradual rise which peaks in section three (score number 35).

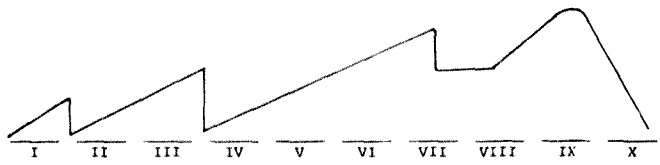
Section four (score number 36) sees another drop in the dynamic level, which, however, is followed by an increase in sections five (score number 37) and six (score number 38), and is enlivened by the dynamic waves within these sections. Section seven (score number 39) sees a further increase followed by a drop, and this lower dynamic level is retained at the beginning of section eight (score number 41). The use of dynamic waves towards the end of this section, however, increases the dynamic level considerably.

There is a further increase in section nine (score number 43), and this high dynamic level is retained until the climax (score number 44), after which there is a falling away in the dynamic level.

The final section (score number 45) has, for the most part, a low dynamic level, although here, too, Britten has made interesting use of dynamic waves to maintain interest during this long section.

The dynamic profile can, therefore, be illustrated as follows:

Ex. 8: Dynamic profile

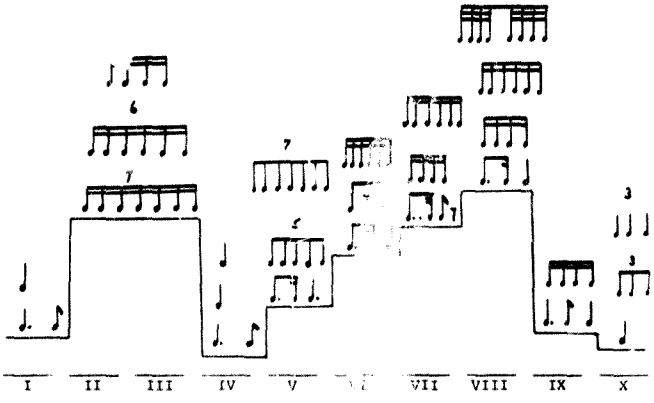


Thus, the dynamics present an overall profile of a gradual rise followed by a decline.

4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes occur in stages which correspond with the variations of the ostinato. The rhythm follows a *rising contour* of acceleration from section one to the end of section three. There is a marked drop in rhythmic activity in section four. From section five on, however, the *rhythmic* activity gradually increases reaching a peak in section eight and dropping off slightly at the high of the passacaglia in section nine. This is followed by a reduction in rhythmic activity in section ten.

Ex. 9: Rhythmic profile



It is interesting that the rhythm continues with a rising contour during section two while the other parameters are all at a lowpoint. Thus, the rhythm provides the interest and vitality while the other parameters are down. In contrast, Britten reduces the rhythmic activity

when the dynamics and density are high in section nine, so that the peak of rhythmic activity occurs in section eight.

4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The density follows the contour of double rise plus arch. The upward curve of this arch profile is supported by that of the range which, however, shows a slight narrowing at the peak of the arch in section nine. The wide contrasts of range in section ten help to create changing colour contrasts.

The dynamics follow the contour of the density with, however, a slight drop in section seven and the first part of section eight. This slackening of dynamics prevents monotony setting in on the long upward curve of the arch, and prepares for a final surge to the peak of the arch.

Rhythmically, there is a rising contour during the first three sections, and it is the rhythm, therefore, which creates the momentum and vitality during section two in which the other parameters are down.

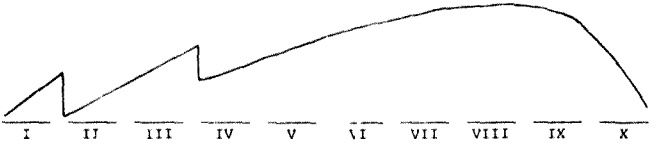
The rhythm follows an arch contour from the beginning of section four and carries the interest during section seven and the first part of section eight when the dynamics are low. The peak of rhythmic activity is reached in section eight, and this is followed by a slight drop-off in section nine, and a much more pronounced drop-off in section ten.

Thus, both the rhythm and dynamics show slight deviations from the overall contour of double rise followed by an arch.

5. FORMAL PLAN

This passacaglia presents the contour of a double rise followed by an arch.

Ex. 10: Formal profile



5.1 LARGER FORM

The main tonal centres of the three movements of this concerto are as follows:

- I F moving to D
- II a
- III D

This passacaglia is placed at the end of a multimovement work, and in this position is used (especially from the point at which D is confirmed, six measures before score number 43) to establish the tonal centre of D.

Both the first and last movements of this work gravitate towards D, the first movement having started out from F, and the passacaglia having begun with a series of rapidly shifting tonal areas.

The main tonal areas of the work are therefore (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

- I Moderato con moto D
- II Vivace a
- III Andante lento D
  (Passacaglia)

CHAPTER 4

"DIRGE" from *SERENADE*, OP. 31, 1943

1. BACKGROUND

In this song cycle for tenor, horn and strings, six poets provide words depicting evening, moonlight, nocturnal fancies and fears. It was composed expressly for the tenor Peter Pears and the horn player Dennis Brain. The cycle consists of six poems framed by a prologue and an epilogue:

- Prologue		
- Pastoral	- Cotton	(1630-1687)
- Nocturne	- Tennyson	(1809-1892)
- Elegy	- Blake	(1757-1827)
- Dirge	- Anonymous	(15th century)
- Hymn	- Ben Jonson	(1752-1637)
- Sonnet	- Keats	(1795-1821)
- Epilogue		

The "Dirge" is the fourth song of the cycle, and in it the Baroque devices of ostinato and fugue are combined in a highly original and expressive synthesis.

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

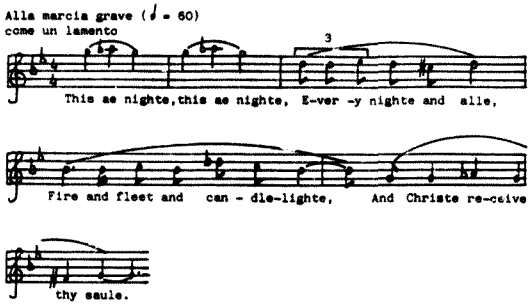
2.1 STRUCTURE

This is an example of an ostinato which occupies the middle range and remains absolutely constant throughout. The ostinato forms a strophic setting of the words against an instrumental fugue for horn and strings.

2.1.1 Sequence

Measure three of the ostinato theme opens with a sequential treatment of measures one and two (measure two being an exact repetition of measure one). This is a pitch sequence a perfect fourth lower, while the rhythmic values have been altered.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [1]



2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

In this ostinato theme semitone movement predominates. Basically, the ostinato outlines a descending G minor triad, and chromatic movement is used to add intensity.

2.1.3 Chordal influence

The basic outline of the theme is that of a descending G minor triad. The triad is highly ornamented. The shape of the line stresses the dominant note D.

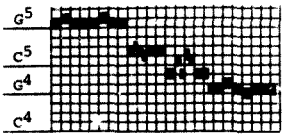
2.1.4 Contour

The ostinato theme presents a declining contour, with the interval of a perfect octave between the first and last notes. The total range-span of the ostinato theme is a diminished tenth.

---

[1] B. Britten, *Serenade*, Op. 31, pocket score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1944), p. 18.

Ex. 2: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



2.1.5 Length

Rounding off the five and seven-eighths measures to the nearest complete measure, produces an ostinato theme of six measures.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

The tonal centre is clearly G.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

The metre is simple quadruple (4/4). The tempo is slow: "Alla marcia grave (♩ = 60)". There are no tempo fluctuations during the course of the passacaglia.

2.1.8 Rhythm

This ostinato theme shows considerable rhythmic activity. This could be accounted for by the fact that it is a middle register ostinato and is therefore more active rhythmically than the low register ostinatos.

2.1.9 Melodic tension

The overwhelming concentration on semitone movement within the framework of the G minor triad creates melodic tension. The leading note to tonic ending of the ostinato, on the other hand, makes the theme a self-sufficient entity and does not create any forward propulsion.

2.1.10 Derivation

This ostinato theme is not derived from material heard in any of the preceding songs of the cycle.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement setting is unaccompanied for the most part and forms the beginning of an arch contour. The bass strings enter on the first beat of the sixth measure. The ostinato theme is five and seven-eighths measures long.

2.2.2 Variations in length

After the first statement of the ostinato an eighth note anacrusis is added in all subsequent statements, so that the ostinato theme is exactly six measures long.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

Throughout, the tone colour of the ostinato theme remains unvaried. It is always presented by the tenor voice in the same octave register.

2.2.4 Tempo changes

A constant tempo is maintained throughout, to the extent of there being a direction ("senza ritardando") that there be no slackening in the final measure.

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

At no time during this passacaglia is the ostinato theme abandoned or in any way fragmented.

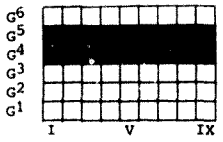
2.2.6 Degree of audibility

The ostinato theme is audible throughout. However, as the accompaniment shapes the rise of the arch contour the ostinato moves from the foreground to the background, and returns to the foreground on the downward curve of the arch. Thus, in contrast to the overall formal arch profile of the passacaglia, the audibility of the ostinato theme forms an inverse arch.

2.2.7 Octave register

The ostinato theme occupies a middle range throughout without any change of octave register.

Ex. 3: Octave register of ostinato



2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

This six measure ostinato theme is repeated nine times. The passacaglia is therefore fifty four measures long. The total duration of the passacaglia is 3.35 minutes. [2]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

A moderate degree of sectionalization is created by this theme, due to its distinctive chromatic nature and also to its prominent position in the middle register. The setting of the poem is melodically strophic, each verse being set to a single statement of the ostinato.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

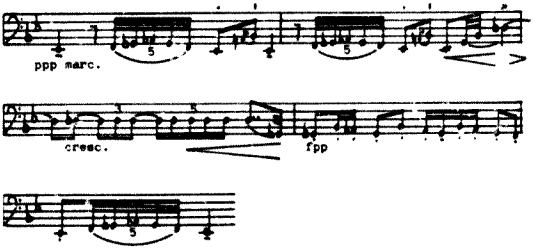
3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

The accompaniment is a fugue based on the following theme:

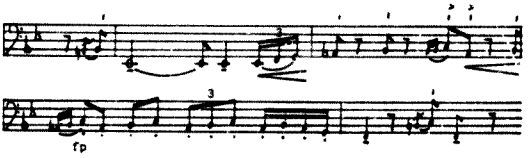
---

[2] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *Serenade*, with Peter Pears and Barry Tuckwell, cond. Benjamin Britten, London Symphony Orchestra, Decca SXL 6449.

Ex. 4: Accompanying fugue theme [3]



Ex. 5: Countersubject of accompanying fugue [4]



The rhythmically active accompanying fugue is considerably varied and extended, progressively more so with each entry.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

Throughout the first, second and third statements of the ostinato theme the accompaniment occupies a lower register than does the ostinato. Towards the end of the fourth statement, however, the accompaniment rises above the ostinato theme, and does not return to its original low register until the final statement of the ostinato. Throughout, the register of the ostinato remains fixed while it is the accompaniment which changes register.

---

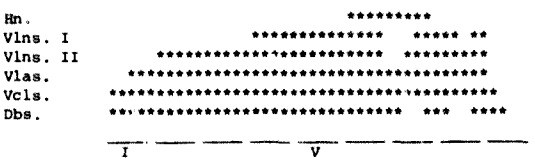
[3] Britten, *Serenade*, pp. 18-19.

[4] Britten, *Serenade*, p. 19.

3.2.2 Tone colour

In this passacaglia the accompaniment tends to change colour within the statements of the ostinato and not always at the beginning of a repetition. The change of tone colour within the statements of the ostinato and the overlapping of the tone colour between statements makes for a highly integrated conception.

Ex. 6: Tone colour of accompaniment



3.2.3 Texture

Throughout, the textural changes merge into one another resulting in a pattern of gradual growth up to and including the sixth climactic statement. Thereafter, there is a gradual decline.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

To avoid extreme sectionalization, the fugue theme occasionally overlaps the ostinato phrases especially on the downward curve where all the statements are overlapped by the accompaniment.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus theme

This is a very interesting example of the ability of the accompaniment to shape the passacaglia. In this instance the ostinato theme is fixed at a static level with regard to both range and intensity. Therefore, the task of shaping the passacaglia is left entirely to the accompaniment. The fugue enters in a subdued low register at the second statement. and utilizes changes in tonal level, tone colour and register to gradually gain prominence so that by the sixth statement, the horn's rendition of the fugue theme forms the highpoint of intensity. Having reached this peak of the arch profile, there is a gradual thinning-out

of the texture, and this is accompanied by a return to the original register and tonal level to complete the decline of the arch.

3.3.3 Grouping

The use of a fugue in the accompaniment naturally results in a grouping of those statements in which the fugue theme appears. Consequently, there is a grouping of statements two, three and four. The fugue theme also appears in statements six and eight, while the episodic material in statements five and seven is derived, for the most part, from the fugue theme. The fugue theme, therefore, dominates the accompaniment and gives a sense of forward movement and continuity to this short passacaglia, while at the same time, diverting attention from the constantly reiterated ostinato.

4. MOTION FACTORS

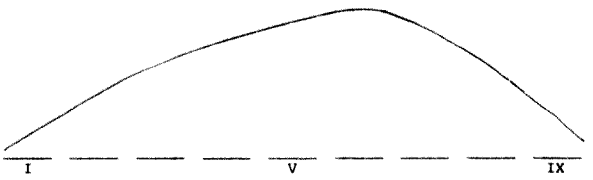
4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

This passacaglia exhibits progressive stages of increasing density from the appearance of the fugue subject at the end of the first statement of the ostinato until the thickest texture is reached in the climactic sixth statement of the ostinato. Thereafter, there is a gradual drop in intensity until, at the conclusion of the passacaglia at the end of the ninth statement of the ostinato, only the tenor voice remains.

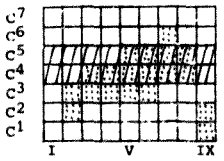
The density, therefore, has an arch profile.

Ex. 7: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 4: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁝⁝ = accompaniment)

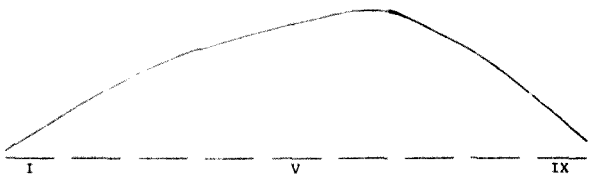


The upper limit of the range of the accompaniment presents an arch profile beginning below the pitch level of the ostinato, then mingling with it, and finally rising above it at the peak of the arch, thereafter descending to the lowest register it has occupied during the passacaglia.

4.1.3 Dynamics

As is the case with the density, the dynamic changes are made in stages. The dynamic level increases with each successive entry of the fugue theme, as well as with the appearance of the episode in statement five of the ostinato, until the entry of the horn with the fugue theme in statement six of the ostinato brings the dynamic level to a peak. Thereafter, the dynamics drop in stages during the episode in statement seven and the appearance of the fugue theme in statement eight. Within these longer stages of dynamic changes, however, Britten makes use of dynamic waves by means of several short crescendi within the fugue theme which create vitality within the larger framework of the dynamic arch profile.

Ex. 9: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

The fugal nature of the accompaniment precludes dramatic rhythmic changes. The fugue theme and its inherent rhythms dominate the accompaniment throughout. In the final measures, however, the active rhythmic patterns of the fugue are abandoned as the accompaniment fades away.

4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

Several factors contribute to the arch contour — intensity, density and range all follow an arch profile. During the decline of the arch several irregular surges in rhythmic activity occur for the purpose of finality.

This arch profile created by the accompaniment presents an interesting foil to the static level of pitch and intensity presented by the ostinato.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

The sense of finality is achieved by the ostinato returning to the foreground in the final statement, the final three measures of the ostinato being almost unaccompanied, so that the ostinato forms, as it were, a frame for the passacaglia. This final statement of the ostinato with very sparse accompaniment balances the opening unaccompanied statement. A drop in the level of all the parameters — dynamics, density, pitch and rhythm — creates the downward curve of the arch profile.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The six measure ostinato sung throughout by the tenor solo, supports an energetic fugue on an independent theme. This fugue runs through several tonal excursions before completing its arch profile. The highpoint of intensity comes in the sixth statement of the ostinato, where the horn makes its only utterance with a long forceful presentation of the fugue theme.

Forward motion is created by the fugue's tonal progress, its register, contour, tone colour and its overlap of phrases with the ostinato: the entries of the fugue are generally out of phase with the ostinato generating a powerful rhythmic tension.

The monotony of the vocal part causes one to focus one's attention on the accompaniment after the first few statements of the ostinato.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia is the fourth song of the cycle, in other words it forms part of a multimovement work. It occupies a central location within the overall form, and represents the highpoint of the work around which the other movements revolve. Its tonal position within the overall scheme is indicated below (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

(F) D^{b} E^{b}_{c} E $\underline{e^{b}}$ B^{b} D (F)

CHAPTER 5

PETER GRIMES, OP. 33, 1945

1. BACKGROUND

The opera *Peter Grimes* was first performed at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London on 7 June, 1945. The libretto by Montagu Slater is based on part of the poem *The Borough* (1819) by the East Anglian poet George Crabbe (1754-1832). This poem describes the town and inhabitants of Aldeburgh, Crabbe's birthplace. It consists of twenty four letters written in heroic couplets. Letter XXII contains a description of a fisherman, Peter Grimes, whose original counterpart was a fisherman named Tom Brown who lived in Aldeburgh in the middle of the eighteenth century. There were few redeeming features about Crabbe's Peter Grimes.

In the process of transforming the Grimes of Crabbe's poem into the protagonist of a twentieth-century opera, Slater made several important changes, and the resulting character study is quite different from Crabbe's. In place of the religious background and imagery, there is a conflict between an individual and society. While Crabbe's Grimes was completely "untouched by pity, unstung by remorse, and uncorrected by shame", [1] Slater's Grimes is represented as a psychopathic introvert outsider, at war both with his nature and his fellow beings.

The opera consists of a Prologue and three acts. The setting of the action is the Borough, a small fishing village.

The basic theme of the opera is that of a man in conflict with society. According to Hans Keller:

> Peter Grimes is the living conflict. His pride, ambition, and urge for independence fight with his need for love; his self-love battles against his self-hate. Others, too, he can (sometimes) love as intensely as he can despise them, but he cannot show, let alone prove his tenderness as easily as his wrath — except through the music which, alas, the people on the stage don't hear. Thus he is destined to seem worse than he is, and not to be as good as he feels. "Peter Grimes" is the story of the man who couldn't fit in. [2]

---

[1] A.J. Carlyle and R.M. Carlyle, eds., *The Poetical Works of George Crabbe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), p. 106

[2] D. Mitchell and H. Keller, eds., *Benjamin Britten: A Commentary on his Work* (London: Rockcliff, 1952), p. 111.

There are six orchestral interludes in *Peter Grimes*, an interlude at the beginning of each of the three acts, and an interlude between the two scenes of each act. The interludes between the acts are descriptive as follows:

Interlude I depicts the shore at dawn, and sets the stage for Act II.
Interlude III ushers in the Sunday morning of the Church scene.
Interlude V depicts the tranquillity of the moonlight playing on the waves of the sea. Nevertheless, despite the peaceful setting, the stabbing phrases for flute and harp which pervade the music, are suggestive of the agonised jabbing within Grimes himself, and of his inescapable predicament.

The interludes between the scenes relate to Peter:

Interlude II depicts the storm, but it corresponds to the storm within Peter himself, and thus it has a natural pictorial as well as a psychological meaning.
Interlude IV is in the form of a passacaglia which symbolizes the conflict within Grimes's personality - his frustrations, his guilt, his longings, his inadequacy, his resentment.
Interlude VI depicts the total desperation of Grimes who by this time is nearly mad, and his encroaching insanity is symbolized by the dense fog which is blown in from the sea and envelops the whole village.

Interlude IV, in the form of a passacaglia, thus has a central position within the opera as a whole.

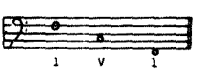
2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 Sequence

The eleven beat ostinato theme, reduced to its essential notes is as follows:

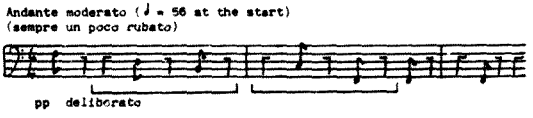
Ex. 1: Outline of ostinato theme



There is thus a strong tonic-dominant-tonic movement, and the ostinato theme is, in fact, an ornamented pedalpoint.

A strong unifying factor within the theme is the rhythmic sequence.

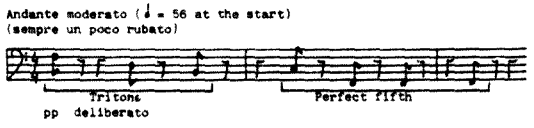
Ex. 2: Ostinato theme (rhythmic sequence bracketed) [3]



2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

Four intervals are contained within the ostinato theme. Of these, two are minor thirds, one a semitone and one a perfect fifth. However, the most striking intervals of this theme are the tritone and its perfect fifth resolution.

Ex. 3: Intervallic structure of ostinato theme [4]



2.1.3 Chordal influence

A diminished triad is clearly outlined by the first three notes of the ostinato theme. The perfect fifth which follows this diminished triad may be regarded as the outer two notes of a major or minor triad.

---

[3] B. Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33, study score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1963), p. 349.

[4] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, p. 349.

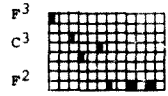
2.1.4 Tritone influence

A tritone is formed by the first and last notes in measure one and resolves to the perfect fifth in measure two.

2.1.5 Contour

The overall contour of the ostinato theme is that of a decline.

Ex. 4: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The distance of an octave exists between the outer notes of the falling contour. The final note of the ostinato theme is exactly a perfect octave away from the starting pitch. This beginning and ending of the theme on the same pitch class, allows a smooth connection for the repetition of the theme. The total range-span of the theme is narrow, being a perfect octave.

2.1.6 Length

Rounding off the two and three fourths measure ostinato theme to the nearest complete measure, the theme is three measures long. It is repeated thirty nine times during the course of the passacaglia.

2.1.7 Tonal centre

The tonal centre is F. The ostinato theme consists essentially of the tonic and dominant notes, F and C, and is built on the strong implied cadential formula I-~~IV~~-V-I.

2.1.8 Metre and tempo

Here Britten uses an ostinato theme in simple quadruple metre (4/4). The tempo indication is "Andante moderato (♩ = 56 at the start)". Thus the initial tempo is fairly slow. There is a gradual increase of tempo during the course of the passacaglia. At the nineteenth statement of the ostinato theme (score number 48), there is the direction "poco

a poco piu moto", while at the thirty fourth statement (score number 53) is the direction "stringendo". This increase of tempo is not countered until the very end of the passacaglia where there is a "molto rall." just prior to the resumption of the dramatic action.

2.1.9 Rhythm

The ostinato theme occurs thirty nine times without transposition or any rhythmic alteration apart from the prolongation of the final note of the theme in the thirty ninth statement.

A unique feature of the rhythm of this ostinato theme is that on each repetition it is stated one beat earlier in the measure. This constant shifting of one beat forward per statement creates an ever-present underlying current of vitality.

The eleven beat ostinato theme occurs four times within an eleven measure unit, and the variations above it overlap both the smaller and larger units of the ostinato. Thus, on the basis of the rhythmic placement, the statements of the ostinato fall naturally into groups of four, that is, eleven measure units. There are ten eleven measure units of the ostinato, and there are ten variations of the viola theme above it.

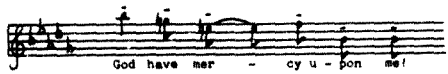
2.1.10 Melodic tension

The tritone outlined by the first to third notes of the ostinato is resolved in the following measure. F, the final note of the theme, does not generate melodic activity as it is the tonal centre of the theme, and also the note with which the theme begins. It does, however, allow for very smooth repetitions of the theme.

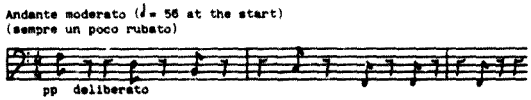
2.1.11 Derivation

The ostinato theme is based on an augmented form of the Grimes motive which is first heard in the previous scene in the churchyard where Grimes strikes Ellen, and then pleads "God have mercy upon me".

Ex. 5: Grimes's motive [5]



Ex. 6: Ostinato theme [6]



The ostinato theme retains the simple quadruple metre of the original motive. Apart from the ostinato theme occurring in a lower register, the most conspicuous change from the original motive is the insertion of a rest or rests between each of the notes of the ostinato theme. These rests have the effect of delaying the appearance of each successive note, and hence of slowing down the overall tempo of the ostinato theme. The time lag between the appearance of each successive note is twice that in the original motive. The six note Grimes motive is extended into a seven note ostinato theme by an additional appearance of the final note.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement is unaccompanied. This serves as an introductory device in which the basic material is heard prior to any variation above it. The introductory statement forms the beginning of a gradual rise contour.

The viola theme accompaniment enters on the tenth beat of the second statement of the ostinato.

---

[5] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, p. 282.

[6] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, p. 349.

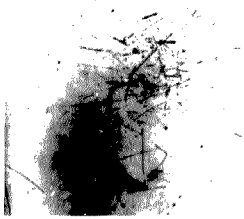
2.2.2 Variations in length

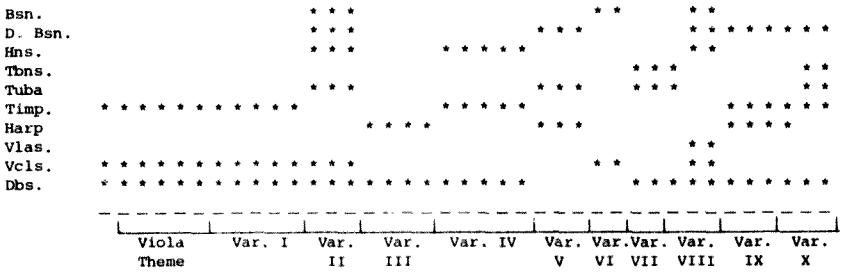
The length of the ostinato theme remains constant throughout apart from a lengthening of the final note in the final statement.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

Britten has used a highly imaginative touch in the variation of the tone colour of the ostinato theme. Each variation of the viola theme above the ostinato is accompanied by a new tone colour in the ostinato itself. Britten employs an additive technique of instrumentation so that an overall crescendo is created while within this crescendo he varies the instrumental combinations so that vitality is created by the tone colour.

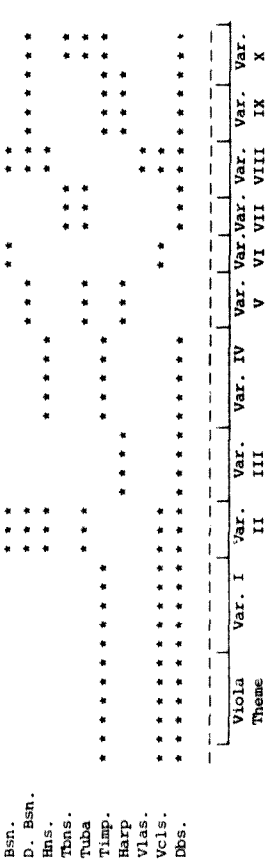
The two most essential contributory elements to the theme's vitality are, therefore, the highly imaginative orchestration of the ostinato theme, and the rhythmic device of allowing the ostinato theme to occur one beat earlier in the measure on each repetition.





Ex. 7: Tone colour of ostinato

Ex. 7: Tone colour of ostinato



2.2.4 Tempo changes

There are no major changes of tempo in this passacaglia. From statement nineteen of the ostinato (score number 48) onwards, there is a gradual quickening of tempo as the passacaglia presses towards its highpoint in the thirty ninth statement of the ostinato (score number 55).

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

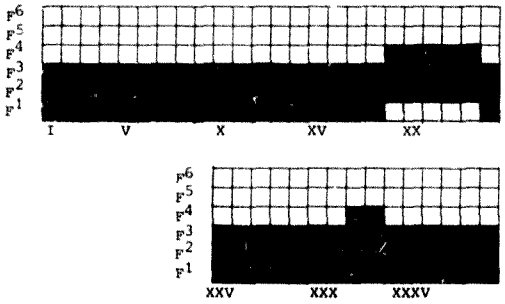
At no point in this passacaglia is the ostinato theme abandoned. Furthermore, the ostinato is never fragmented in any way.

2.2.6 Degree of audibility

The ostinato is audible throughout the passacaglia and is never itself subjected to variation.

2.2.7 Octave register

Ex. 8: Octave register of ostinato



The ostinato is found in the bass registers throughout.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

The very short ostinato theme, only two and three fourths measures, is repeated thirty nine times.

The overall length of the passacaglia is one hundred and nine measures. The overall time-span is 5.22 minutes.[7]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

This ostinato theme creates a minimal sectional effect due to the fact that it is basically diatonic, moving from tonic to dominant and back to tonic, with the raised subdominant used to give semitonal support to the dominant from below.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

The accompanying material consists of a theme given out initially by the viola solo, and followed by ten continuous variations of no consistent length. There is a direct relationship between the viola theme and the ostinato in that the viola theme consists of several juxtapositions and overlappings of a falling minor third and rising semitone, that is, notes two to four of the ostinato.

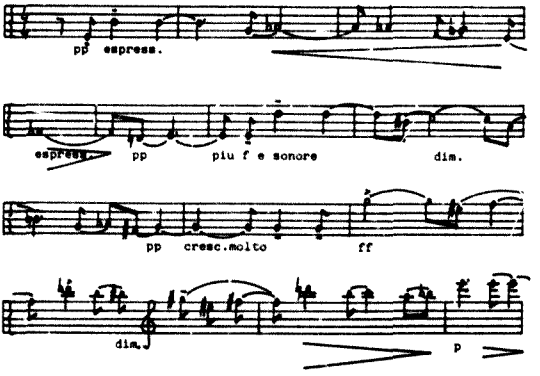
Despite the intervallic similarity between the ostinato and the accompanying theme, they remain quite independent of each other. The ostinato functions as a harmonic support, while at the same time it infuses rhythmic vitality and creates a tonal stability.

The thirteen measure viola theme consists of three phrases of irregular length. While this theme consists of three phrases the variations on it are not structurally fixed. The variations are not clearly subdivisible into phrases, and each variation on the viola theme could be regarded as being one continuous phrase. Arbitrary subdivisions may be made, however, on the basis of instrumentation, dynamics and sequential treatment. Nevertheless, the variations do not exhibit any uniform phrase subdivision.

---

[7] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *Peter Grimes*, with Jon Vickers, Heather Harper, Jonathan Summers, Elizabeth Bainbridge, Teresa Cahill, cond. Colin Davis, Orchestra of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Philips 9500.523-525, 1979.

Ex. 9· Viola theme [8]



The viola theme undergoes variation through the use of different rhythms, contrasting instrumental colours and changing textures. Each variation on the viola theme encompasses from two to five ostinato statements. These variations have the effect of taking the attention away from the individual statements of the ostinato and create the effect of a larger grouping. The fact that the ostinato rarely coincides with the variations on the viola theme, creates a long continuous flow.

The viola theme is rhythmically more active than the ostinato. Ties across beats and barlines obliterate the metric accents and produce a subtle, free-flowing rhythm of an improvizational character. This feeling of rhythmic freedom is emphasized by the ostinato which at no time indubitably confirms a 4/4 metre.

The range of each of the three phrases of the viola theme becomes progressively wider: a perfect fifth, a major seventh, and two octaves plus a perfect fifth.

The range encompassed in the first two viola phrases is narrower than the range of the ostinato. However, the two octaves plus a perfect fifth of the third phrase far exceeds the octave range of the ostinato.

---

[8] Britten, *Peter Grimes*, p. 349.

All the variations on the viola theme have a contrapuntal texture with the exceptions of variations three and five, where the combinative use of harmonic variations affords a strong contrast to the otherwise contrapuntal texture. Nevertheless, thematic significance is still present within the moving parts.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

Throughout this passacaglia the accompaniment occupies a register higher than that of the ostinato. The ostinato remains in the bass registers throughout the passacaglia.

3.2.2 Tone colour

In this passacaglia, Britten relies on changing tone colours rather than on a continuum of colour for shaping the overall passacaglia. The possibilities of tone colour variation in the ostinato theme are restricted to unison or octave doublings and to low-range instruments. The accompaniment, however, can adopt a far wider range of colours and textures, and its colours range from the sombre sound of the solo viola theme, to the chordal brass of variation five, to the brilliant running passages for high woodwind and strings in variations seven to ten.

Britten here relies heavily on the high woodwind and strings for building tension towards the climaxes. These tone colours are effectively offset by the use of woodwind plus horns in the pyramid chords of variation three of the viola theme, as well as by the chordal brass in variation five, both variations being the source of tremendous harmonic tension.

The use of staccato articulation in variations one, four and six of the viola theme also adds variety to the tone colour.

Within the changing tone colours, Britten uses an additive crescendo, in which the tone colours tend to change with each variation on the viola theme.

Ex. 10: Tone colour of accompaniment and ostinato

3.2.3 Texture

The only abrupt textural change in this passacaglia occurs in variation three of the viola theme, which causes a sudden drop in the density achieved in variations one and two. Following variation three, however, the textural changes are gradual, resulting in a gradually rising contour.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

There is only one occasion in this passacaglia where the entries of the ostinato and the accompanying theme coincide, namely, at the beginning of the third variation on the viola theme one measure before score number 47. In addition, each variation on the viola theme spans from two to five repetitions of the ostinato. This further minimizes the sectional effect.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The accompaniment completely dominates the passacaglia, while the ostinato functions purely as a rhythmic and harmonic support.

3.3.3 Grouping

The variations on the viola theme are grouped by the recurrence of certain rhythms. Variations one and four have the rhythmic figure  in common, while variation two is based on its diminution . Variations three, four, five and six exhibit syncopation in the presentation of the falling minor third to rising semitone motive. Variations nine and ten have running sixteenth note passages in common.

Thus, there is a rhythmic grouping between variations one, two and four; three, four, five and six; nine and ten.

Of greater significance, however, is the use of the same accompanying theme, although with variations, throughout. This creates a feeling of progress by directing the attention to an ingredient which is longer than the ostinato repetitions.

4. MOTION FACTORS

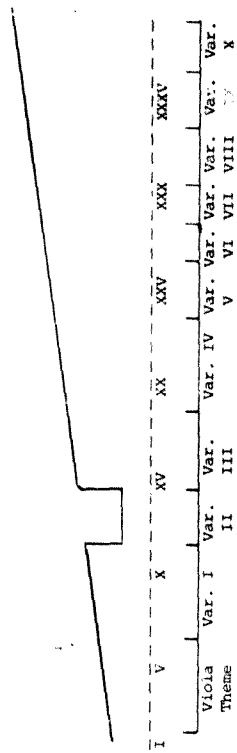
4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

The changes in density are made in stages which correspond with the variations on the viola theme above the ostinato.

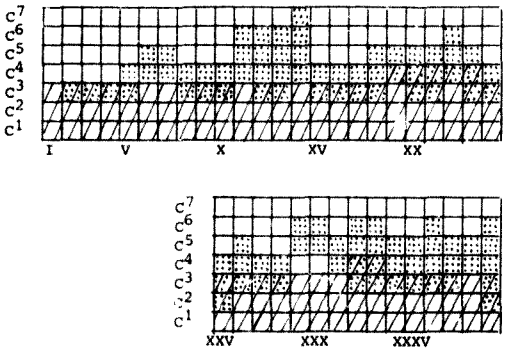
The density profile is one of gradual rise with interruption.

Ex. 11: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 12: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁘ = accompaniment)



The accompaniment reaches its highest octave register during the first peak of the rising profile in variation two of the viola theme.

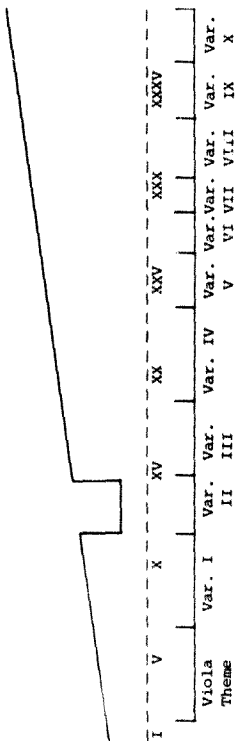
It reaches its widest registral span, however, in the final statement of the ostinato during the peak of the gradual rise profile. It therefore reinforces both highpoints of the formal profile.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The crescendos correspond to a gradual rise profile. The crescendo is not made in one long sweep, but in two peaks, the second more intense than the first, and several smaller crescendi, which give a cumulative effect of a long crescendo.

The only marked reduction in dynamics occurs suddenly at the beginning of variation three on the viola theme immediately following the first peak of the gradual rise contour.

Ex. 13: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes are made in stages which coincide with the variations on the viola theme.

The drop in rhythmic activity at the beginning of variation three on the viola theme corresponds with the drop in both density and dynamics. Thereafter, apart from a slight drop in activity again in variation five, the rhythmic profile follows an upward curve.

Ex. 14: Rhythmic profile

4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The discussion above reveals an extremely close correlation of all the parameters in this passacaglia, even to the extent that they combine to form a temporary peak approximately one-third of the way through. They then combine to form an even more intense peak at the culmination of the passacaglia.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

In the operatic version of this passacaglia, the climax leads directly into the dramatic action of the following scene, thus the need for finality in the conclusion of the passacaglia is obviated. The dramatic action follows on immediately without pause. In the orchestral version, however, Britten has added a short and subdued epilogue for solo viola which recalls the opening viola solo.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The unaccompanied opening, followed by progressive growth in the accompaniment, results in an expanding texture and a growing intensity creating a rising profile. This rise is continued and brought to a climax resulting in a gradual rise with interruption profile.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia with its central location within the opera functions as a focal point. It gives the opportunity for the use of confirming elements, the ostinato theme being derived from a previously-heard motive, the only transformation being that of rhythm. This motive is given an added dimension of confirmation by the fact that the accompaniment is also derived from it. It is furthermore, a key motive throughout the opera.

The ostinato, centred as it is on F, affords a strong contrast to the A-E^{b} swing of tonalities which pervades the opera.

CHAPTER 6

THE HOLY SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE, OP. 35, 1945, NO. 9, "DEATH, BE NOT PROUD!"

1. BACKGROUND

Britten wrote *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, a song cycle for high voice and piano, in one week in August 1945, six months after he had completed *Peter Grimes*. He and Yehudi Menuhin had just returned from giving a series of concerts to the survivors of German concentration camps. Britten suffered a delayed reaction to an inoculation and this cycle was written within a matter of days, while he was running a very high temperature. The theme is one of sickness, death and loss.

The cycle consists of nine songs:

- Oh my blacke Soule
- Batter my Heart
- O might those Sighs and Tears
- Oh, to vex me
- What if this present
- Since she whom I loved
- At the round Earth's imagined corners
- Thou hast made me
- Death, be not proud!

The passacaglia movement is the final song of the cycle.

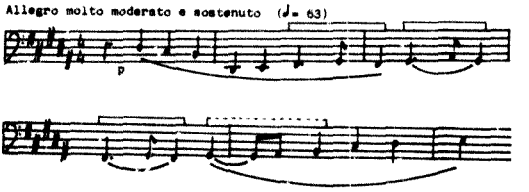
2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 Sequence

This six measure ostinato theme relies heavily on sequence in its central portion (m. 2^3-4^3).

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme (sequence bracketed)[1]



This sequence is exact in both pitch and rhythmic relationships. The rhythmic sequence continues for one further statement (m. 4^4-5^2) after the pitch sequence has been abandoned.

2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

This ostinato theme, apart from the downward leap of a minor sixth at the beginning of measure two, is constructed exclusively from stepwise movement. As a result, whole tone and semitone intervals predominate. The theme contains fifteen whole tone intervals, three semitone intervals, and one interval of a minor sixth.

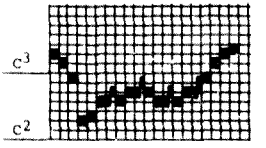
2.1.3 Chordal influence

The ostinato theme moves around the notes of the B major triad.

2.1.4 Contour

The ostinato theme presents a contour of a decline followed by a gradual rise with interruption.

Ex. 2: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



[1] B. Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, Op. 35 (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1946), p. 37.

The semitone interval between the subdominant on which the ostinato theme ends, and the mediant on which it begins, generates forward momentum, and allows for smooth repetition.

The total range span is fairly narrow, being a minor ninth.

2.1.5 Length

The overall length of the ostinato theme is five measures.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

The tonal centre of the ostinato theme is B. The entire theme is based on the diatonic scale of B major.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

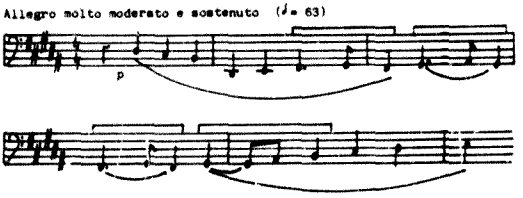
The metre is simple quadruple (4/4). The tempo indication is "Allegro *molto moderato e sostenuto* (♩ = 63)".

2.1.8 Rhythm

The rhythmic pattern of the ostinato theme is uncomplicated, moving mainly by quarter notes, dotted quarter notes and eighth notes.

Rhythmic sequence is used in the central portion of the theme (m. 2^3-5^2).

Ex. 3: Rhythmic sequence of ostinato theme (rhythmic sequence bracketed) [2]



This rhythmic sequence has been so designed that each repetition begins on a different beat of the measure (beats three, two, one and

---

[2] Britten, *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, p. 37.

four respectively). This helps to create buoyancy and vitality within the theme.

2.1.9 Melodic tension

This theme is relatively calm both rhythmically and melodically. Melodically it does not move beyond the bounds of B major.

Britten uses the open-ended device of ending on the subdominant. This creates forward momentum.

2.1.10 Derivation

This ostinato theme is not derived from material previously used in the cycle.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement is accompanied although the accompaniment is sparse. It consists of a repeated dominant note F^4 sharp below which there is an alternation of the mediant D^4 sharp and the subdominant E^4.

2.2.2 Variations in length

The only variation in the ostinato theme length occurs in the final statement where the final measure (m. 5^2-6^1) is missing.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

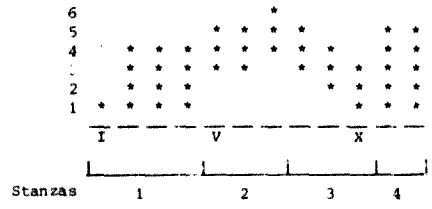
The frequent changes of octave register of the ostinato theme are used as a means of varying the tone colour, and give vitality and forward momentum to the ostinato.

After the first stanza (statements one to four) in which the ostinato theme is spread over four octave registers, there is a cut-back to three octave registers in the second and third stanzas. During these two stanzas, however, the tone colour is kept alive by the frequent shifts of octave register

The climactic fourth stanza sees the ostinato occupying its widest registral span in this song, namely five octave registers.

The frequent fluctuations in register of the ostinato in the central portion of the song, namely stanzas two and three, help to create vitality as well as a feeling of forward momentum.

Ex. 4: Tone colour of ostinato



2.2.4 Tempo changes

The tempo is constant throughout the passacaglia apart from a slight broadening in the final four measures.

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

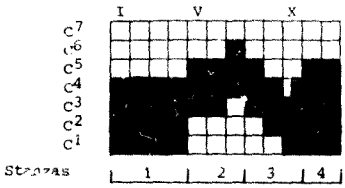
At no point does the ostinato theme drop out completely. In the final statement, the ostinato is followed strictly up to measure 5^1. Thereafter, the final few measures of the song are based on measures 2^3-4^4 of the ostinato.

2.2.6 Degree of audibility

The straightforward presentation of the ostinato theme ensures its audibility throughout.

2.2.7 Octave register

Ex. 5: Octave register of ostinato



The above illustration shows that the ostinato is not confined to the lower registers. It also occurs in the middle register in statements one to four, and wanders into the upper registers in statements five to eight as well as in the final two statements.

This is, therefore, a full-range ostinato theme.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are twelve statements of the five measure ostinato. The overall length of the passacaglia is sixty three measures. The time-span is 3.01 minutes. [3]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

The bland quality of this ostinato theme, based as it is on the diatonic scale of C major, ensures that it will create only a minimal sectional effect. The open-ended ending on the subdominant allows for smooth repetitions of the ostinato.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

The accompaniment of the first and fourth stanzas of the text is based

---

[3] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: Peter Pears, Benjamin Britten, *The Early Recordings*, EMI RLS 748, 1980.

directly on the ostinato theme.

In stanza two, the accompaniment breaks away from a slavish adherence to the ostinato, but nevertheless continues to be preoccupied with moving around the triad of B major. It thus retains a close affinity with the ostinato which also moves around the notes of the B major triad.

In stanza three, the accompaniment breaks away from its preoccupation with the B major triad which dominates stanzas one, two and four.

Thus, the accompanying material is based predominantly on the material of the ostinato, and the passacaglia is, therefore, based on a single theme.

The accompaniment of stanza one is not rhythmically more active than the ostinato. In stanza two, however, the accompaniment becomes more active rhythmically, and there is a further increase in the rhythmic activity of the accompaniment in the third stanza.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

Apart from the final line of the third stanza, the accompaniment remains for the most part above the ostinato throughout.

3.2.2 Tone colour

In the first stanza, the ostinato is accompanied by the voice with harmonic support from the piano.

In the second stanza, the tessitura of the voice is generally higher than in the previous stanza. Once again, there is harmonic support from the piano.

There is a marked change of tone colour in the third stanza. The voice, while remaining in much the same register as in the second stanza, is doubled by the piano.

In the fourth stanza, the voice once again has scant harmonic support from the piano.

This passacaglia depends mainly on the changing tone colours of the ostinato to create tone colour variety and vitality.

3.2.3 Texture

The textural changes coincide with each new stanza of the text. There is a reduction in the overall textural fabric at the beginning of the second stanza. However, each of the following two stanzas sees an increase in textural density. Thus, following an initial drop at the beginning of stanza two, the texture follows a gradually rising contour to the end of the song.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

With the exception of the first stanza, the beginnings of each of the four vocal stanzas coincide with the beginnings of repetitions of the ostinato.

Within the first, second and fourth stanzas, the accompaniment overlaps each repetition of the ostinato thus minimizing the sectional effect. In the third stanza, however, the beginning of each repetition of the ostinato coincides with the beginning of a new line of the text, thus creating a more sectional effect than is the case in the other three stanzas. This sectionalization adds to the agitated effect of this particular stanza.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The ostinato functions as a rhythmic and harmonic support while the accompaniment has the dominant role.

3.3.3 Grouping

Britten here uses the device of grouping together several statements of the ostinato with the thematic accompaniment of each stanza. This technique diverts attention away from the constant recurrence of the ostinato. In addition, in the first and last stanzas, the accompaniment is, with very slight modifications, based directly on the ostinato. This use of the same accompanying theme in the first and last stanzas has a unifying effect and creates a sense of return. The structure is further unified by the fact that this accompanying theme is based directly on the ostinato theme.

4. MOTION FACTORS

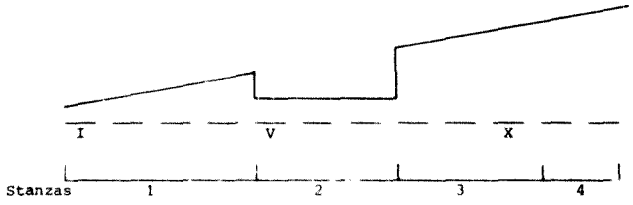
4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

The changes in density levels coincide with the stanzas of the text and not with the repetitions of the ostinato. The changes in density levels therefore occur in stages.

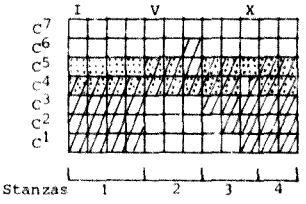
The overall density profile is that of a gradual rise with an interruption in stanza two of the text, that is, during statements five, six and seven of the ostinato.

Ex. 6: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 7: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁝⁝ = accompaniment)



The range of the accompaniment does not show very wide fluctuations, and is confined throughout to the same two octaves. This, however, has only to be expected as the voice has a limited range.

In this instance, variety of octave range is provided by fluctuations in the octave level of the ostinato itself, rather than from any marked change of range in the accompaniment.

Within the framework of the outer two stanzas, the range of the ostinato in stanzas two and three rises and falls to form an arch contour.

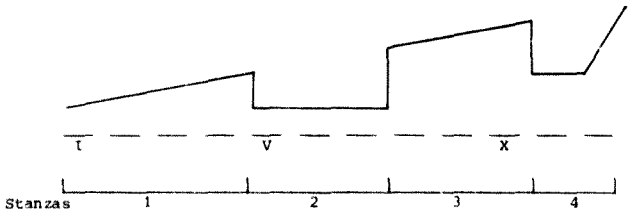
4.1.3 Dynamics

As is the case with the density, changes in dynamic levels tend to coincide with the stanzas of the text, rather than with the repetitions of the ostinato. Thus, the dynamic changes take place in stages.

As each of the stanzas occupies several repetitions of the ostinato, interest is sustained by the use of dynamic waves within each of the stanzas.

The overall dynamic profile is that of a rise with double interruption.

Ex. 8: Dynamic profile



Each successive peak of this rise reaches a higher point of intensity, so that the point of highest intensity occurs in the final measures of the song.

The first of the two interruptions of the rising profile is longer than the second. This is understandable in that a long interruption immediately before the peak of the rise would have the effect of delaying the momentum rather than allowing a breathing space before a final surge to the peak of the rise.

4.1.4 Rhythm

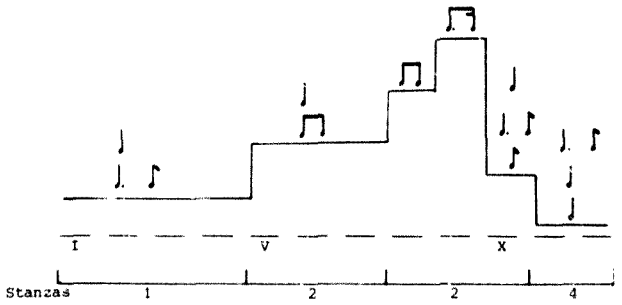
As is the case with both the density and dynamics, the changes of rhythm occur in stages. In stanzas one, two and four, these changes coincide with the stanzas of the text. In stanza three, however, the changes coincide with the repetitions of the ostinato.

There is a progressive increase in rhythmic activity from the first stanza to the middle of the third stanza.

In the final stanza, however, the rhythmic activity slackens and half notes and quarter notes predominate in the accompaniment.

The rhythmic profile is thus one of gradual rise to the mid[illegible] f the third stanza, followed by a dropping off at the end of the third stanza, and this lower level of rhythmic activity is maintained during the final section.

Ex. 9: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The overall profile of the dynamics is that of a gradual rise with double interruption. The density, on the other hand, presents a profile of gradual rise with single interruption which coincides with the first interruption of the dynamic profile.

Both the rhythm and range have arch contours.

The high density level during the second interruption of the dynamic curve maintains the impetus and momentum of the overall profile.

The rhythm deviates from the general profile in that it slows down at the culmination of the rise within a context of high density and nigh intensity. However, it is the rhythm which carries the momentum forward during stanza two of the text (statements five to seven of the ostinato) when the parameters of both dynamics and density are at a lowpoint.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

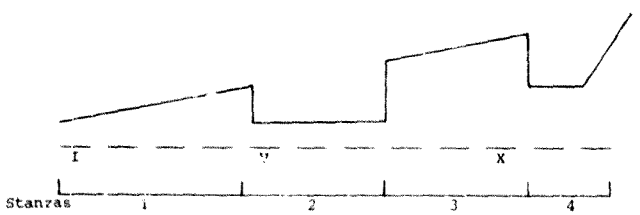
A sense of finality in this passacaglia is achieved both by a return of previously used accompaniment material, and by a broadening of the rhythm.

A final framing device is the several repetitions of the dotted quarter, eighth note, quarter note (♩. ♪♩) motive of the ostinato which prolongs the thematic material as the passacaglia nears its conclusion.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal profile is that of a gradual rise with double interruption.

Ex. 10: Formal profile



The first interruption sees all the parameters, with the exception of the rhythm, at a lowpoint. It also coincides with an upward change of register of the ostinato. The second rise introduces contrasting thematic material in the accompaniment, as well as more animated rhythms and a contrasting texture.

The second interruption coincides with a lowpoint in both the rhythm and dynamics, while the texture is at its densest for the entire passacaglia. This second interruption is slightly shorter than the first. This shorter length is necessitated by its position so near the end of the passacaglia. Any lengthy interruption at this point would destroy the ongoing momentum rather than giving an added impetus to the final upward surge.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia occupies the position of the final song of the cycle.

The basic tonal relationships of the songs of the cycle can be expressed as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

b c e f sharp g E flat D e flat B.

The excellent capacity of the passacaglia to establish or reaffirm a tonal centre is here exploited to the full in the return to the tonal area of the opening song of the cycle.

CHAPTER 7

THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA, OP. 37, 1946

1. BACKGROUND

This two-act chamber opera by Britten was completed in 1946 and had its world premiere on 12 July 1946 at Glyndebourne. In America it was premiered in Chicago on 1 June 1947. The libretto, written by Ronald Duncan (1914 ---), was based on the play *Le viol de Lucrèce* (1931) by André Obey (1892-1975).

The original source of *The Rape of Lucretia* reaches back via Shakespeare (1564-1616) to Livy (59 B.C.-A.D. 17). The one great modern precedent for the musico-theatrical treatment of a classical subject was Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1936) in which the libretto in Latin by J. Cocteau and J. Daniélou was based on Sophocles's tragedy.

Obey's play used the device of a chorus of two individuals to comment on the action from a contemporary point of view. In Ronald Duncan's hands, this device became even more flexible in that his Male and Female Chorus, each represented by a single performer, not only comment on the action, but influence the drama and the minds of the protagonists.

> Throughout the opera the Male and Female Chorus sit at either side of the stage. Though clothed in togas, they are contemporary figures, presenting the drama to the audience as a didactic fable; man's nature is violent; until he learns to control it, his fate will be tragic; the only hope for such control is in following Christ. They initiate the story, comment upon it throughout, and at its end state the moral. [1]

The setting is Rome 510 B.C. Legend has it that the rape led to the uprising in which the Romans expelled the Etruscans from the city.

The small orchestral force which Britten chose for this, his first chamber opera, was essentially the same as he had used in his *Sinfonietta*, Op. 1. It consists of

---

[1] G. Martin, *The Opera Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1979), p. 486.

- five wind — flute (doubling piccolo and bass flute)
  oboe (doubling cor anglais)
  clarinet (doubling bass clarinet)
  bassoon
  horn
- solo string quartet plus double bass
- harp
- percussion

The culminating ensemble of the work is a passacaglia and it represents the climactic movement of the opera following the death of Lucretia.

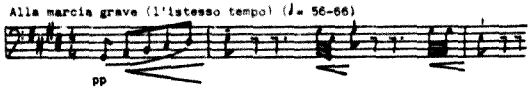
2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 Sequence

This ostinato theme does not make use of pitch sequence. Rhythmic sequence does, however, occur in the second and third motives (♩♩· 𝅘𝅥𝅯 ♪ ♩♩· 𝅘𝅥𝅯 ♪).

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [2]

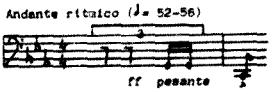


The funeral march rhythmic figure which occurs in the second and third motives, first appeared in Britten's music in his second funeral march, the "Funeral March" from the *Frank Bridge Variations*, Op. 10, where it appears as a falling fifth.

---

[2] B. Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, Op. 37, study score, revised edition (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1949), p. 294.

Ex. 2: *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, Op. 10, [3] "Funeral March", mm. 1^1-2^1



2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

The most conspicuous interval in this theme is that of the major third which occurs in the second and third motives. The first motive consists of diatonic scalic movement.

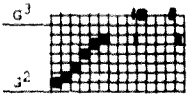
2.1.3 Chordal influence

The triad of E major has a strong influence on this theme. All the rhythmically emphatic points of the theme concentrate on either the root or the third of the E major triad.

2.1.4 Contour

Although the final eighth note creates a slight decline in contour, the overall effect is of a rise. This contour can therefore perhaps best be described as a modified rise.

Ex. 3: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one eighth note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The range-span is a perfect octave. The tonic ending allows for smooth repetitions of the ostinato theme which begins a minor sixth lower on the mediant.

---

[3] B. Britten, *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge*, Op. 10, pocket score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1938), p. 31.

2.1.5 Length

This is a short ostinato theme being exactly two measures long. It is thus considerably shorter than the favoured Baroque length of four or eight measures.

The ostinato is stated twenty seven times.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

This ostinato theme is clearly based on the diatonic scale of E major.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

The metre is simple quadruple (4/4). The tempo indication is "Alla marcia grave (l'istesso tempo) (♩ = 56-66)".

2.1.8 Rhythm

The rhythmic movement is uncomplicated and predominantly by eighth notes.

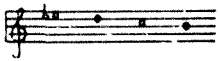
2.1.9 Melodic tension

This ostinato theme does not move beyond the confines of E major, and therefore melodic tension is at a minimum. The tonic ending, furthermore, makes the theme a self-contained entity and does not create forward propulsion.

2.1.10 Derivation

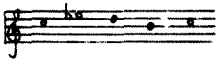
There are two dominating motives in this opera: that associated with Tarquinius and that associated with Lucretia. The motive associated with Tarquinius (the element of destruction) is scalic. By extension, a scale passage, either ascending or descending, is identified with the male element.

Ex 4 Tarquinius's motive



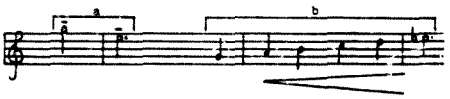
The motive associated with Lucretia (the destroyed) contains the same notes as that of Tarquinius, but this time arranged to form a pair of minor thirds.

Ex. 5: Lucretia's motive



The ostinato theme is based both rhythmically and melodically on the hymn which is sung by the Male and Female Chorus as an introduction to each act and at the conclusion of the opera.

Ex. 6: Hymn for Male and Female Chorus [4]



This hymn combines both the male element (scale passage) and the female element (m[illegible] third).

Ex. 7: Ostinato theme [5]



Just as the hymn for Male and Female Chorus combines both male and female elements, so does the ostinato theme, which is derived from it, combine both male and female elements.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement, which is scored for strings, is unaccompanied.

---

[4] Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, p. 11.

[5] Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, p. 294.

2.2.2 Variations in length

There are twenty seven statements of the ostinato in which the original length is consistently maintained. Even during the canonic middle section the original length is rigidly maintained by the timpani, although variations of the length do occur in the other parts.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

The sextet of singers which takes part in this passacaglia is built up progressively, beginning with only one singer. The fabric grows more complex as each of the other singers is added one by one.

Britten adopts the novel idea of changing the instrumentation of the ostinato for the introduction of each new character. Thus, Collatinus's entry is accompanied by the strings, Junius's entry by cor anglais, bassoon and harp, Lucia and Bianca's entry by bassoon, horn, cello and double bass, the Female Chorus's entry by harp, violins and viola, and the Male Chorus's entry by the timpani. During the entry of the Male Chorus, a canon is built up on the ostinato theme by the other voices of the sextet, each doubled by specific instruments:

Lucia and Bianca	+	viola and flute
Junius	+	violin II and cor anglais
Collatinus	+	violin I and clarinet
Female Chorus	+	cello, double bass and bassoon.

Finally, the full orchestra accompanies the entire sextet in an octave passage.

As a result of this imaginative use of tone colour, Britten is able to direct attention towards a unit which is longer than that of the ostinato theme, and this helps to lessen the sectional impact of the ostinato.

Ex. 8: Tone colour of ostinato

Col.		Junius	Lucia & Bianca	Female Chorus	Male Chorus	All
I	V		X	XV	XX	XXV
Strings		Cor anglais Basscon Harp	Bassoon Horn Cello D. Bass	Harp Vlns Viola	Timpani plus vocal quintet with doubling instruments	Flute Cor anglais Clarinet Bassoon Horn Harp Timpani Strings

2.2.4 Tempo changes

There are no tempo changes during the course of the passacaglia.

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

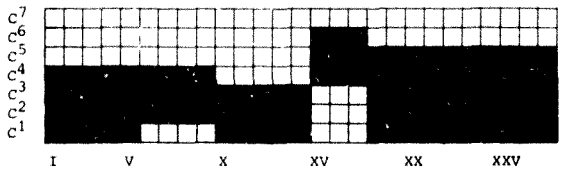
For twenty seven statements, the ostinato appears in its original form with no alterations of any kind. Thereafter, however, in the concluding stages of the passacaglia, the ostinato is fragmented, and only the second and third motives are heard.

2.2.6 Degree of audibility

The ostinato is audible at all times due to the fact that it appears unchanged throughout except in the coda. Even during the canonic middle section, the ostinato appears unchanged on the timpani.

2.2.7 Octave register

Ex. 9: Octave register of ostinato



From the above diagrammatic representation of the octave register of the ostinato, it is evident that the only point at which the ostinato invades the middle and upper registers is during the entry of the Female Chorus, that is, during statements fifteen, sixteen and seventeen.

It is thus a full-range ostinato due to its exploitation of all registers.

The transfer of the ostinato to a higher register occurs just prior to a further surge of intensity to the climax in statements twenty three to twenty seven.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are twenty seven statements of the two measure ostinato, and as each of these statements conforms to the original length, there are exactly fifty four measures in the main body of the passacaglia. These fifty four measures are then followed by a coda of eight measures. The overall length, therefore, is sixty two measures.

The overall time-span is 4.11 minutes. [6]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

The diatonic nature of the ostinato theme results in a bland quality which creates a minimal sectional effect. The ending on the tonic, however, results in a self-sufficient unit which heightens the sectional effect as it does not generate forward momentum.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

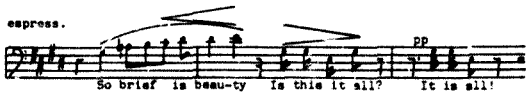
The accompaniment is dominated by a single theme — that of the ostinato itself. The appearances of this accompanying theme are interspersed

---

[6] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording. B. Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, with Heather Harper, Janet Baker, Peter Pears, Bryan Drake, Benjamin Luxon, John Shirley-Quirk, Elizabeth Bainbridge, Jenny Hill, cond. Benjamin Britten, English Chamber Orchestra, Decca SET 492-3, 1971.

with figuration. The Male and Female Chorus, Collatinus, Junius, Lucia and Bianca progressively build up an ensemble in which more singers are heard together than at any other point in the opera. They unite in their outcry against the passing nature of beauty and the finality of death.

Ex. 10: Accompanying theme [7]



3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

The ostinato does not confine itself to the lower regions. During the initial entries of Collatinus and Junius (statements one to nine), the ostinato is in an octave register higher than that of the accompaniment. At the entry of Lucia and Bianca (statements ten to fourteen) the ostinato drops below the accompaniment.

At the entry of the Female Chorus (statement fifteen) the ostinato again rises above the accompaniment. However, from the entry of the Male Chorus (statement 18), the ostinato remains below the accompaniment until the climactic octave passage (statements twenty three to twenty seven) during which the octave doublings of the ostinato cause it to be heard both below and above the accompanying vocal sextet.

Thus, both the accompaniment and the ostinato change register freely.

3.2.2 Tone colour

Britten here uses the additive method of increasing intensity by weight. The members of the vocal sextet have staggered entries, apart from Lucia and Bianca who have a joint entry, and the voices are gradually piled on top of one another until the climax is reached in the octave passage beginning at statement twenty three.

---

[7] Britten, *The Rape of Lucretia*, p. 295.

3.2.3 Texture

The textural changes are made gradually as the vocal sextet is progressively built up, resulting in a pattern of gradual growth to the peak of the arch contour in the octave passage beginning at statement twenty three.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

The build-up of the vocal sextet diverts attention from the constantly recurring ostinato in that the introduction of each new voice spans several statements. Furthermore, only the entry of Lucia and Bianca coincides exactly with the beginning of a statement of the ostinato.

Although the canonic middle section of the passacaglia is based on the melodic formula of the ostinato, nevertheless the canonic entries do not coincide with the unswerving statements of the ostinato in its original form, on the timpani. The aural impression of this section is that of a large unit rather than of many recurrences of the melodic formula of the ostinato.

Thus, despite the fact that the main accompanying material is based on the ostinato, Britten has handled it in such a way that it nevertheless diverts attention from the sectional character of the ostinato itself.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The accompaniment is dominated by a single theme which corresponds to that of the ostinato itself. As a result, this passacaglia is dominated by the ostinato theme which pervades the entire accompaniment, and not by any contrasting accompanying material.

3.3.3 Grouping

A ritornello effect is created by

- the use of the ostinato theme in the accompaniment by each voice of the sextet immediately prior to the entry of the following voice;
- its use as the basis of the canonic middle section of the passacaglia;

- the return of this theme at the conclusion of the climactic octave passage.

This ritornello effect creates a highly unified structure. It also creates a balance between focussing the attention on the ostinato and diverting attention away from it.

4. MOTION FACTORS

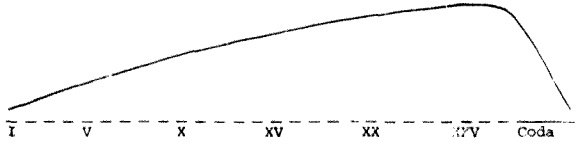
4.1 THE PARAMETER

4.1.1 Density

The density changes take place in stages. Britten here achieves a pattern of progressive density which results from his additive method of introducing the members of the vocal sextet. The density reaches its height during the octave passage (statements twenty three to twenty seven) after which there is a gradual tapering-off during the coda.

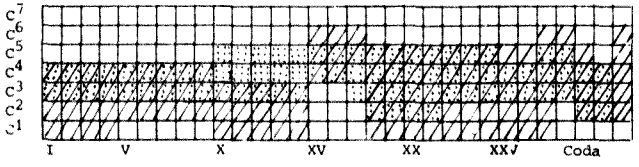
The density, therefore, presents an arch profile which reaches its peak in the latter half of the passacaglia.

Ex. 11: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 12: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁝⁝ = accompaniment)



There is a gradual widening of the range over the first fourteen statements of the ostinato. At the entry of the Female Chorus at statement fifteen, the ostinato rises to a level higher than that of the accompaniment. In statement eighteen, at the entry of the Male Chorus, the ostinato drops slightly, but nevertheless remains entwined with the accompaniment until the end of the passacaglia, with its octave doublings rising above the accompaniment during part of the climax (statements twenty five to twenty seven), and remaining above for most of the coda.

There is actually a narrowing in the range of concentration during the climax of the passacaglia. Variety in the upper limit of the range is, in fact, provided more by the ostinato itself than by the accompaniment.

The range of the accompaniment does not show very wide fluctuations. This, however, can be ascribed to the limited range of the voices.

In this passacaglia, therefore, variety in octave range is provided by fluctuations in the octave level of the ostinato theme itself, rather than by very wide contrasts in the range of the accompaniment.

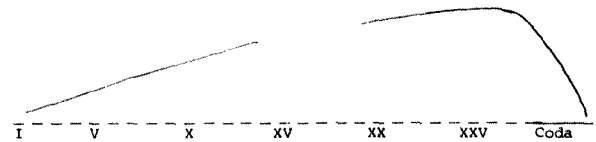
The wide contrasts of range in the accompaniment towards the end of the passacaglia are part of the scheme of changing colour contrasts.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The dynamic changes take place in stages which correspond with the progressive entries of the members of the vocal sextet, and reach a peak in the octave passage in statements twenty three to twenty seven. The coda which follows statement twenty seven, sees a gradual reduction in the dynamic level.

The dynamics, therefore, present an arch profile.

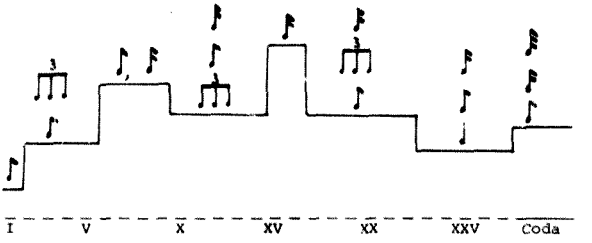
Ex. 13: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes take place in stages. The rhythm shows a gradually rising profile which reaches a peak during the entry of the Female Chorus (statements fifteen to seventeen) after which there is a falling-off in activity until the beginning of the coda (end of statement twenty seven). The slight increase in rhythmic activity during the coda creates vitality while the parameters of density and dynamics are on the decline.

Ex. 14: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

Rhythm is the element which devi[illegible] from the general arch profile created by the density and dynam[illegible] It slows down at the approach to, and during the culmination of, the peak, and then rises slightly while the density and dynamics are on a downward curve.

[illegible] range, following a temporary drop in statements eighteen to twenty six, reaches a peak again in statement twenty seven, while both the density and dynamics are still at their highest level. During the coda, however, there are some interesting contrasts of range which, combined with the slightly increased rhythmic activity, create vitality on the downward curve of the arch.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

Britten uses the device of allowing the ostinato theme to disintegrate on the downward curve of the arch profile. After statement twenty seven, only the second and third motives of the ostinato theme remain, and there are no further clear divisions in the variations. These two

motives also dissolve towards the end of the downward curve, and thereby Britten provides a highly convincing ending to a most powerful movement.

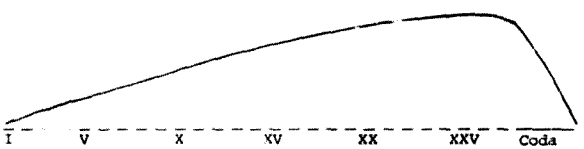
The disintegration of the ostinato theme could be symbolic of the seeming disintegration of life in the face of death.

The culmination of the movement dovetails into the epilogue of the opera.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal plan of this passacaglia is that of an arch profile. This arch takes an unusually long time (twenty two statements) to reach its peak. The peak is then sustained for some length (five statements) before descending rapidly to complete the arch profile.

Ex. 15: Formal profile



5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia is the culminating ensemble of the opera and represents the powerful climax of the work as a whole.

Peter Evans sees Act Two of this opera as being concerned with the keys of C sharp (sin) and C (innocence).[8] Act One both begins and ends with the tonal centre of C minor, whereas Act Two establishes the new tonal area of C sharp minor:

> Lucretia's slumber is in a white C major that, as elsewhere in Britten, can be used to symbolize innocence. That being accepted, the opening of the rape scene in a restored C sharp minor seems to have that key the converse significance, as a key of sin.[9]

Seen out of context, the ostinato suggests E major. Nevertheless,

---

[8] P. Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: Dent, 1979), p. 138.

[9] Evans, p. 138.

the variations are dominated by harmonizations centred on C sharp minor. Despite the powerful efforts of the octave passage ("How is it possible") to assert a tonality on C natural, the C sharp tonality still prevails. It is only during the Epilogue at the entry of the Male Chorus "It is not all" that C major is hinted at again, and this tonality of C major is firmly established when the opening hymn of the chorus appears for the last time (score number 107).

> C major is not a restoration of Lucretia's innocence but rather the achievement of a state of blessedness, throwing a glow back on the whole cycle of experience. [10]

Sin and death, which is its outcome, are therefore symbolized by a C sharp minor tonality, and however strong the pull to C major in the octave passage "How is it possible", it is not achieved.

The C sharp minor tonality of the passacaglia therefore serves to reinforce the polarity between the tonal centres of C sharp and C in the second act of the opera.

The main tonal centres of the opera are as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia is underlined):

Act I: c - c

Act II: c sharp - C

---

[10] Evans, p. 141.

CHAPTER 8

ALBERT HERRING, OP. 39, 1947

1. BACKGROUND

Albert Herring, in three acts, was Britten's first comic opera. It was first performed at Glyndebourne on 20 June 1947. The American premiere was given at Tanglewood, Massachusetts on 8 August 1949.

Albert Herring and *The Rape of Lucretia* share common features in that they are both chamber operas and are both derived from French originals. *The Rape of Lucretia* is based on a play by André Obey, and *Albert Herring* is based on a short story by Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), *Le Rosier de Madame Husson*. Britten's librettist was Eric Crozier who transferred the action from Normandy to Loxford, a small market village in East Suffolk, England, and advanced the period setting by fifty years to 1900.

> Lady Billows, virtuous herself and the self-appointed guardian of virtue in others, is anxious to select a May Queen in Loxford; but, in default of suitable female candidates, she decides on a May King, and her choice falls on Albert Herring who works in a greengrocer's shop and has a reputation for unassailable innocence and chastity. During the May Day celebrations, he is fêted and plied with lemonade that has been surreptitiously laced with rum. So fortified, he breaks out and escapes that evening from the stifling atmosphere of his home. When his absence is discovered the following morning, search parties are sent out. At first it is feared he may have been killed; but just as his death is being lamented, he arrives back, dirty, dishevelled, and defiant after a bibulous night out. [1]

When reprimanded by his mother on his return, he denounces her puritanical upbringing, and, with newly found self-assertion sends his neighbours out of the shop.

There is no chorus in this opera and the chamber orchestra consists of

---

[1] E.W. White, *Benjamin Britten: His Life and Operas* (London: Faber, 1970), p. 133.

- flute (doubling piccolo and alto flute)
- oboe
- clarinet (doubling bass clarinet)
- bassoon
- horn
- percussion
- harp
- string quartet
- double bass

Thus, like *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring* is scored for wind and string quintets plus harp and percussion.

In both *Peter Grimes* and *Albert Herring* Britten portrays an individual, living in a small community, who comes into conflict with society. Peter Grimes does not survive the experience, but Albert Herring does, and faces a life released from his mother's apron strings.

> In *Peter Grimes* most of the local worthies are motivated by delight in power, on however small a scale, and turn naturally to persecution of any whose faces fail to fit. Herring's Loxford is rather less sinister a place than the Borough, but even here the pressures and claustrophobia of convention can be strongly sensed. ... As in *Grimes*, moreover, that hierarchy is most effective and menacing when it acts with maximum unanimity — as it does when Albert reappears after his night on the tiles and everyone realizes that he is not dead after all. [2]

The passacaglia Threnody in Act III represents the musical climax of the opera. It is sung by Lady Billows, her five committee members, Mrs Herring, Nancy and Sid.

> His orange-blossom crown is brought in, battered and bespattered, and taking this as the embodiment of Albert, the company assemble around it and sing a tragic-comic lament. [3]

---

[2] A. Whittall, *The Music of Britten and Tippett: Studies in Themes and Techniques* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 119.

[3] P. Howard, *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* (London: Barrie & Rockcliff, 1969), p. 50.

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

This ostinato consists of a melodic bass line above which is superimposed a constant succession of chords. Britten has, thus, here combined both types of basso ostinato variations, namely a constant melodic bass line with a constant succession of chords. The Baroque use of an ostinato based on a succession of harmonies did not presuppose a constant bass line. Within the given harmonic framework some deviation was possible sometimes to the extent that only the first and last chords of the succession remained constant.

This combination of a constant bass line with a constant succession of harmonies is, therefore, a highly innovative and unique contribution to the passacaglia literature.

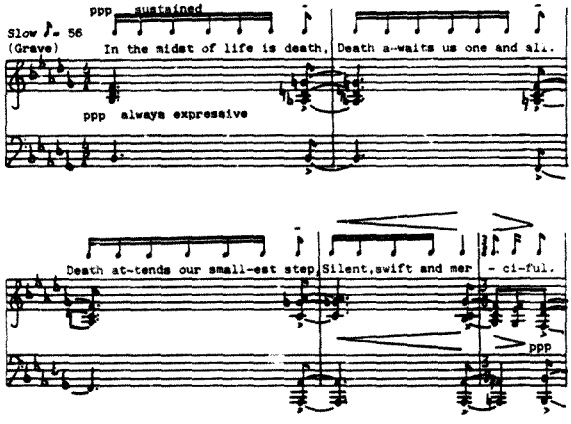
Peter Evans has described the chord succession as follows:

> ... even in the simple harmonic framework on which the passacaglia is to be built there are potent forces, ... and the chordal circuit is carefully organized. The unexpected dissonance, first provoked by and thereafter associated with the word 'death', is Britten's favoured perfect plus augmented fourth though the bass B flat explains it as a dominant thirteenth, i.e., implies a move to the subdominant. Instead the move is to the dominant (i.e., as though German sixth on a IV to I), so that the position of rest too is unexpected. The next movement suggests an impending cadence on to the more relaxed relative major, and the drooping sixths also prepare for this, but the bass move to A natural (creating a false relation) thrusts back to B flat minor. [4]

---

[4] Evans, pp. 160-161.

Ex. 1: Ostinato bass line with superimposed succession of chords [5]



The chord construction associated with the word "death" here, namely, a perfect fourth plus an augmented fourth, is the same construction as was used with the word "storm" in *Peter Grimes*.

2.1.1 Sequence

Pitch sequence is not used in this ostinato. Rhythmic sequence is, however, prominent in the first three measures which are all rhythmically identical (see Ex. 1, above).

2.1.2 Chordal influence

While the ostinato bass line does not outline any chordal structure, nevertheless, it supports a constant succession of chords (see paragraph 2.1, pp. 120-121).

2.1.3 Contour

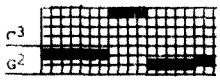
The ostinato bass line presents an arch contour reaching its peak just

---

[5] B. Britten, *Albert Herring*, Op. 39, study score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1969), p. 455.

prior to the midpoint of the theme. The total range span of the bass line is very narrow being only a major sixth.

Ex. 2: Contour of ostinato bass line (one horizontal square equals one eighth note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The ostinato both begins and ends on a tonic root position chord. This facilitates smooth repetitions of the ostinato.

2.1.4 Length

The ostinato is exactly five measures long and is repeated seven times.

2.1.5 Tonal centre

The ostinato is centred on B flat minor.

2.1.6 Metre and tempo

The ostinato begins in simple quadruple (4/8) metre. Interestingly, however, there is a change to simple triple meter (3/8) for the final measure of the ostinato.

A further unusual feature is the agogic stress at the end of the first three measures.

The tempo indication is "Slow, ♩ = 56".

2.1.7 Rhythm

The choral lines have a fairly active rhythm throughout this ostinato, while in the instrumental support, changes of rhythm occur only at the structurally important points (see Ex. 1, p. 121).

2.1.8 Derivation

The ostinato is not derived from any material used earlier in the opera.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement of the ostinato (bass line plus superimposed succession of chords) is given out by the string and wind quintets plus harp and voices.

2.2.2 Variations in length

In the seven statements of the ostinato there are no variations in length.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

The tone colour of the ostinato remains unchanged throughout, namely, string and wind quintets plus harp and voices.

2.2.4 Tempo changes

The same tempo is retained throughout all the presentations of the ostinato.

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

The ostinato is heard consistently for seven statements. Thereafter, it drops out and is not heard again for the remainder of the passacaglia.

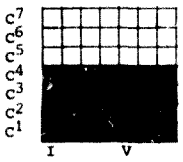
2.2.6 Degree of audibility

The ostinato is clearly audible throughout its seven statements.

2.2.7 Octave register

The ostinato has a constant octave register throughout.

Ex. 3: Octave register of ostinato



2.3 *INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME*

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

The length of this ostinato does not have a very strong bearing on the length of the passacaglia as a whole, due to the fact that it drops out after seven statements.

The seven complete statements of the ostinato occupy thirty five measures. However, the overall length of the passacaglia, is sixty five measures. During the final thirty measures, the ostinato is not heard.

The overall time-span of this passacaglia is 4.17 minutes. [6]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

The ending of this ostinato on the tonic chord in root position allows for a smooth repetition of the initial chord of the ostinato which is also the tonic chord in root position. However, the fact that this ostinato both begins and ends on the root position tonic chord creates a self-contained entity which does not generate forward propulsion.

---

[6] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *Albert Herring*, with Peter Pears, Sheila Rex, Catherine Wilson, Joseph Ward, April Cantelo, Edgar Evans, Owen Brannigan, Sylvia Fisher and others, cond. Benjamin Britten, English Chamber Orchestra, Decca SET 274-276, 1964.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

The accompaniment consists of the successive counterpoints of the members of the vocal ensemble. None of these counterpoints ever attains thematic significance.

The majority of the seven counterpoints added above the ostinato are dominated by stepwise movement. The exceptions are counterpoints four, five and six, those sung by Lady Billows, the Superintendent and Florence respectively. Falling contours predominate in all the counterpoints as befits a lament.

On the appearance of the eighth counterpoint (Sid's solo) the ostinato is abandoned, and does not reappear during the remainder of the passacaglia. Both this eighth counterpoint and the ninth (solo of Mrs Herring) which follows it, are accompanied by an F major seventh chord built up in unison progressively in the voices and orchestra.

The ninth counterpoint (Mrs Herring) is followed by the combination in the vocal ensemble of all nine counterpoints and culminates with a climactic octave passage. Here there is a parallel with the passacaglia in *The Rape of Lucretia* which also culminates in an octave passage.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

The octave register of the ostinato remains static throughout. It is, therefore, the role of the accompanying counterpoints to create variety in octave register. Here, the natural range of the voices provides the necessary variety.

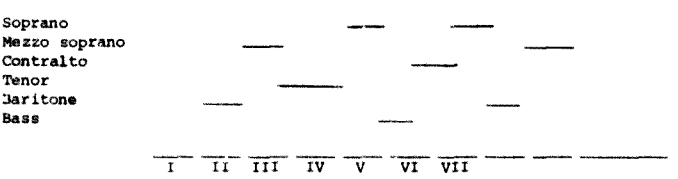
Only the seventh counterpoint (solo of Mrs Wordsworth) remains consistently above the ostinato. The first, third and fifth counterpoints (the baritone, tenor and bass solos of the Vicar, Mayor, and Superintendent respectively) remain consistently below the upper contour of the succession of chords. On the other hand, the second, fourth and sixth counterpoints (the mezzo-soprano, soprano and contralto solos of Nancy, Lady Billows and Florence respectively) are heard both above and below the upper contour of the chord succession.

Once the ostinato has been abandoned, the eighth counterpoint (Sid's baritone solo) is heard below the upper contour of the orchestral and vocal octave accompaniment, while the ninth counterpoint (mezzo-soprano solo of Mrs Herring) is heard both above and below it.

3.2.2 Tone colour

Variety in tone colour is dependent on the timbre of the individual voices as they sing the successive counterpoints against the ostinato bass line and superimposed succession of chords. Britten relies on the changing tone colours of the individual voices rather than on a continuum of colour. In this passacaglia the voices are introduced *successively* and then finally combined in an octave passage, whereas in *The Rape of Lucretia* passacaglia, they are introduced *progressively* and then combined at the climax in an octave passage.

Ex. 4: Tone colour of accompaniment



3.2.3 Texture

As is the case with the tone colour, textural changes in this passacaglia are limited to the textural changes in the accompanying vocal counterpoints. Each of the voices of the choral ensemble is highlighted individually as they each successively sings their own vocal counterpoint above the ostinato bass line and superimposed succession of chords.

A markedly contrasting texture appears at score number 57, at which point, just prior to the climax, all nine of the vocal counterpoints are combined to the accompaniment of a roll on the timpani. A further strongly contrasting texture appears at the climax of the movement at the vocal octave passage "Grief is silent" (score number 58).

In this passacaglia, therefore, Britten has not used an additive method of textural growth, but rather has used strongly contrasting textures which result in a more irregular pattern of growth.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

The accompaniment, consisting of the counterpoints of the individual singers, distracts from the sectional character of the ostinato by virtue of the fact that these counterpoints do not all correspond to the exact length of the ostinato. Of the seven counterpoints heard above the ostinato, only two, those of the Vicar and Lady Billows, occupy exactly one statement of the ostinato. The counterpoints of Nancy, the Mayor, the Superintendent, Florence and Miss Wordsworth, on the other hand, overlap not only the statements of the ostinato, but also the following counterpoint.

The accompanying counterpoints, therefore, minimize the sectional character of the ostinato.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The accompanying counterpoints dominate the passacaglia. The fact that the ostinato is fixed at a static level of range, throws the greatest responsibility for the shaping of the profile onto the counterpoints of the accompaniment. Indeed, following the seventh statement of the ostinato, the ostinato is abandoned, so that the accompaniment is given free rein to shape the profile.

3.3.3 Grouping

The most important grouping device in the early part of the passacaglia is the presence of the ostinato itself which is the thread around which the counterpoints of the soloists are woven.

The octave accompaniment of the final two vocal counterpoints (heard when the ostinato has already dropped out) links these two counterpoints with the subsequent culminating vocal octave passage "Grief is silent".

4. MOTION FACTORS

4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

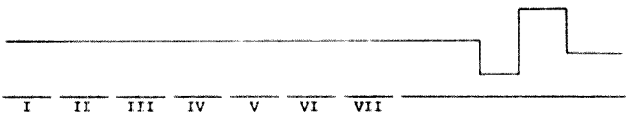
In this passacaglia the same level of density is retained for a considerable length of time, that is, throughout all nine accompanying vocal counterpoints. In other words, the density remains constant for forty four of the total sixty two measures, which is equivalent to seventy one percent of the passacaglia.

Following these forty four measures, there is a drop in denstiy during the combination of the vocal counterpoints accompanied only by the timpani.

In the culminating octave passage "Grief is silent", ironically all the orchestral resources, including the timpani, are mustered in addition to the nine part vocal ensemble.

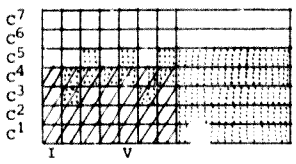
The density changes are therefore made in stages.

Ex. 5: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 6: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁞⁞ = accompaniment)



During the opening section of the passacaglia, that is, during the seven statements of the ostinato, consisting as it does of a bass line plus a superimposed succession of chords, the lower limit of the range remains static and fixed by the ostinato. At the same time, wide contrasts of range are exhibited in the accompaniment as the intensity is kept alive by a process of continuous colour changes.

Once the ostinato has dropped out, following statement seven, the range of the accompaniment spreads both upwards and downwards, so that by the end of the passacaglia it has reached its widest span.

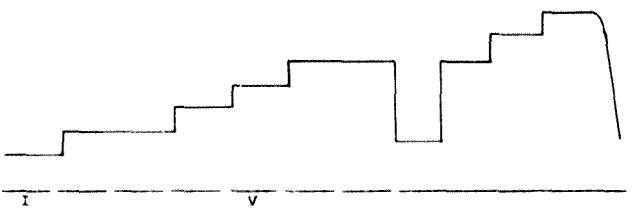
4.1.3 Dynamics

In the initial stages of the passacaglia, the dynamic changes coincide with the repetitions of the ostinato. At the entry of Sid's solo, which is the point at which the ostinato drops out, however, there is a sudden drop in the dynamic level, which, until this point, has had a rising contour.

However, the following solo, that of Mrs Herring, sees the dynamic profile rise to the same level as before the interruption. Further increases in the dynamic level occur in the ensuing combination of the various vocal counterpoints as well as in the octave passage which marks the peak of the gradually rising profile. The final stages of the octave passage see a marked reduction in the dynamic level.

Despite this drop-off in the dynamic level in the final four measures of this passacaglia, the overall dynamic impression is that of a gradual rise. The dynamic profile can thus perhaps best be described as a modified gradual rise.

Ex. 7: Dynamic profile

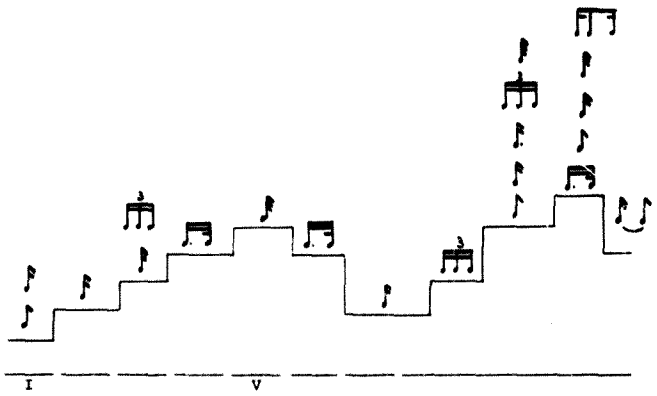


4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes occur in stages which correspond with the vocal solos in the initial stages of the passacaglia. The overall rhythmic profile is one of a gradual rise with slight interruption during the solos of the Superintendent, Florence and Miss Wordsworth, that is, during statements six and seven of the ostinato.

There is also a slight reduction in rhythmic activity in the final three measures of the passacaglia. Thus, the rhythmic profile can perhaps best be described as a modified gradual rise.

Ex. 8: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The range exhibits a gradually widening profile. The other parameters, namely density, dynamics and rhythm all exhibit the profile of a gradual rise with interruption. This interruption does not occur simultaneously in all the parameters, but rather successively in a single parameter at a time, so that the forward momentum does not cease but is carried forward by the other parameters which are not at a lowpoint.

Rhythm is the first parameter to show an interruption in the rising profile. This occurs during statements six and seven of the ostinato.

A drop in the dynamic level follows immediately during the solos of Sid and Mrs Herring.

Immediately following this, during the combination of the vocal counterpoints, there is a drop in the density level.

Thus, Britten has infused interest into the gradual rise profile by staggering the rise in the various parameters.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

A sense of finality in this passacaglia is conveyed by a very short decline in dynamics, rhythm and density in the final four measures of the gradual rise profile. This achieves a feeling of completion and repose, so that despite the fact that the passacaglia is followed immediately by a continuation of the dramatic action, it is complete in itself and does not depend on the material which follows to provide it with a sense of completion.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal plan of this passacaglia is that of a gradual rise. It is perhaps best described as a modified gradual rise in view of the slight decline which occurs in the final few measures.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia movement forms the climax of a multimovement work and appears towards the close of the work as a whole.

The tonal scheme of the opera is as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

Act I	C - G
Act II	F - b flat
Act III	F - <u>b flat</u> - G

Beginning in B flat minor, the passacaglia serves to spotlight the tonality in which the second act ended. However, by the end of the passacaglia F major, in which both the second and third acts begin, has been conclusively established. This passacaglia affords the opportunity of re-establishing the tonal centres of the second act and the beginning of the third act before the opera moves to its conclusion in G major.

CHAPTER 9

BILLY BUDD, OP. 50, 1951, revised 1960

1. BACKGROUND

In 1951, Britten returned to full-scale opera (his first since *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33, 1945) with a work which was commissioned for the 1951 Festival of Britain. In its original four-act form, *Billy Budd* was first performed at Covent Garden, London, on 1 December 1951. The American premiere was given on NBC television on 19 October 1952, while on stage the opera was given its first American performance on 5 December 1952.

Subsequently, in 1960, Britten revised the opera, and the original four acts were drawn together into two acts (Acts I and II were joined as well as Acts III and IV). The original finale to Act I was a Captain's muster, in which Vere appeared and harangued his crew. In the revised version, the muster is deleted and, instead, the whistles sound for a change of watch, and Vere's popularity is merely discussed in his absence by his men.

The first performance of the revised score was given on BBC radio on 13 November 1961, while on stage the first performance was given at Covent Garden, London, on 9 January 1964.

The libretto was written by E.M. Forster and Eric Crozier (the latter of whom had been Britten's librettist for both *Albert Herring*, Op. 39, and *Let's Make an Opera*, Op. 45, as well as the original producer of both *Peter Grimes*, Op. 33 and *The Rape of Lucretia*, Op. 37).

The libretto was based on the last novel *Billy Budd, Foretopman* (1891) of Hermann Melville (1819-1891).

Britten and his collaborators were faced with an extremely difficult task in setting a novel to music. Britten was fortunate in that his imaginative collaborators presented him with what is possibly the finest and most artistic opera libretto adapted from a literary masterpiece since Arrigo Boito's version of Shakespeare's *Otello* for Verdi (1887). It was, furthermore, a libretto which gave Britten ample scope for his exceptional talents.

In the harsh existence of a British man-of-war in 1797, the conflict between the personality of Billy Budd, whose frank disposition, good looks and ability as a sailor make him popular with both crew and officers, and that of the master-at-arms (Claggart) leads to an attempt by the latter to accuse Billy of treason. When called to answer the charge in front of the ship's captain, Billy, who is afflicted with a stammer, cannot find words and, in his frustration, strikes out at the master-at-arms and kills him. Billy is condemned to death. Long after the sentence has been carried out, however, the realization that Billy was innocent of any moral crime continues to haunt Captain Vere, who is fully conscious that his duty has imposed upon him the necessity of aiding evil in its increasing efforts to eliminate goodness from the earth.

Billy Budd is, therefore, a drama of the struggle between Good and Evil, and the subsequent drama they produce in the mind of the man who has been allowed to understand something of the nature of both. It is also a drama of life aboard a ship during the Napoleonic wars, and the ship's company is as important in the opera as the principal characters. Nothing could be more vivid than the way in which the mixed harshness and cheerfulness of their life are depicted in the music.

The passacaglia occurs in Act I, scene iii, immediately after the Novice, on Claggart's instructions, has tried to compromise Billy. Dansker, an old seaman, hears Billy stammering and, seeing the novice creeping away, goes to investigate. On hearing what has happened, Dansker immediately realizes the awful implications and sings heavily both immediately before as well as during the passacaglia "Jemmy-Legs is down on you", while Billy, unaware of his impending doom, babbles on of his happiness on the ship.

The passacaglia, therefore, signals Billy's impending death.

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

This ostinato theme consists of two falling perfect fourths and a rising whole tone.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [1]



2.1.1 Sequence

Neither melodic nor rhythmic sequence occurs in this theme.

2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

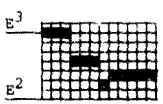
This two measure ostinato theme shows a high concentration of perfect fourth intervals, and this concentration on one particular type of interval results in a tightly-knit structure.

2.1.3 Chordal influence

The ostinato theme outlines the major triad on E flat.

2.1.4 Contour

Ex. 2· Contour of ostinato theme (one horizontal square equals one eighth note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The melodic contour is basically descending, the single eighth note F^2 being an appoggiatura to the following note.

The mediant ending allows for a smooth return to the tonic opening on each repetition. The total range-span of the ostinato is narrow, being only a minor seventh.

2.1.5 Length

This ostinato theme is exactly two measures long, and, as such, is an extremely short ostinato theme. It is considerably shorter than the

---

[1] B. Britten, *Billy Budd*, Op. 50, full score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1961), p. 191.

average four or eight measures of the Baroque passacaglia themes.

There are thirty two statements of the ostinato.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

E flat is the tonal centre of the ostinato theme as it is presented at the outset of the *passacaglia*.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

The ostinato is initially presented in compound duple (6/8) metre. This metre is retained for all the presentations of the ostinato, with the exception of statement twenty eight, which is presented partly in compound triple (9/8) metre.

The tempo indication is "con anima" and the metronomic indication of ♩. = 60 given at score number 63, a few measures before the start of the passacaglia, is still valid.

2.1.8 Rhythm

The rhythmic activity of this ostinato theme is fairly subdued. An interesting feature, however, is the syncopation at the beginning of each measure of this two measure ostinato. This creates considerable tension and restlessness.

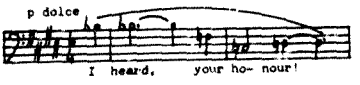
2.1.9 Melodic tension

The ostinato is entirely diatonic. The use of a mediant ending leaves the theme open-ended, and creates a forward momentum.

2.1.10 Derivation

The intervallic structure of the ostinato is based on Claggart's motive which is heard for the first time in Claggart's reply to the first lieutenant immediately preceding Claggart's first arioso in Act 1, scene i, score number 35.

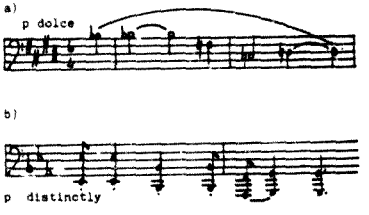
Ex. 3: Claggart's motive, I, i, score number 35 [2]



The initial presentation of Claggart's motive is in compound duple metre (6/4), and in the ostinato theme of the passacaglia it is also presented in compound duple metre (6/8) but with a change of the underlying note value from a dotted half note to a dotted quarter note.

The changed metrical guise of the ostinato theme completely transforms the character of the original motive.

Ex. 4: a) Initial presentation of Claggart's motive [3]
b) Ostinato theme [4]



The use of Claggart's motive as the ostinato of this passacaglia is a forewarning to Billy that Claggart will be the instrument of his destruction. Billy, however, remains oblivious to any sinister undertones.

---

[2] Britten, *Billy Budd*, p. 67.

[3] Britten, *Billy Budd*, p. 67.

[4] Britten, *Billy Budd*, p. 191.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The initial presentation of the ostinato theme on the bass clarinet, harp, timpani and double basses is accompanied by the baritone voice of Billy doubled on the clarinets, violas and cellos with figuration on the flutes.

2.2.2 Variations in length

From statement twenty one on until the end of the passacaglia there is a deviation from the original length (two measures of 6/8 metre) of the ostinato theme. Of these twelve statements which deviate from the original length, only one statement (thirty two) is longer than the original ostinato theme length. Statement thirty two is eight and a half measures long. This lengthening of the final statement is a broadening process in the concluding stages of the passacaglia.

In statement twenty two, the ostinato theme fills only one measure, but sequential treatment of the final two notes extends it to two and a half measures.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

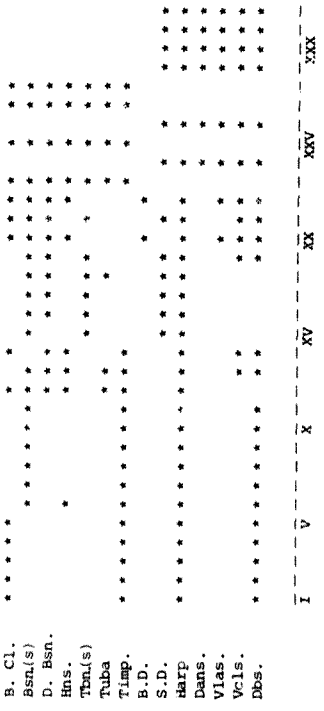
The constantly changing tone colours in the presentation of the ostinato create vitality and avoid the monotony that could set in with the constant repetition of such a short ostinato theme.

There is a gradual build-up of tone colour reaching an initial peak in statements twelve, thirteen and fourteen. This first peak is followed by a cut-back and another build-up to statements twenty and twenty two, after which there is a slight drop-off in tone colour with alternation between two tone colours until the end of the passacaglia proper.

The ensuing coda sees a sudden marked increase in tone colour.

On the upward curve of the arch profile, Britten has used the device of additive crescendo to maintain interest in the tone colour of the ostinato.

Ex. 5: Tone colour of ostinato



2.2.4 Tempo changes

A relatively constant tempo is maintained throughout this passacaglia.

2.2.5 Variations in rhythm

From statement twenty one on, the ostinato does not appear in its original rhythmic form. Of these final twelve statements, four statements (twenty one, twenty three, twenty five and twenty seven) share a common rhythmic structure, while another two statements (twenty four and twenty six) also have a common rhythmic structure. A different rhythmic structure is used for every one of the other six presentations.

This changing rhythmic structure is a further means of infusing interest and vitality into the repetitions of the ostinato.

2.2.6 Variations in fundamental pitch

While the first five presentations of the ostinato all begin on E flat, this pitch class is not used again as the fundamental pitch at any stage during the remainder of the passacaglia. The other eight fundamental pitches used are:

Statements	VI - XII	:	C
Statement	XIII	:	C sharp
Statements	XIV - XIX	:	F
Statement	XX	:	D
Statement	XXI	:	F
Statement	XXII	:	A
Statements	XXIII, XXV, XXVII, XXX	:	G
Statements	XXIV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXIX	:	B
Statements	XXXI - XXXII	:	E

Thus, the first twelve statements of the ostinato are dominated by the tonal centres of E flat and C. The nine statements (fourteen to twenty two) outline the minor triad on D. The remaining statements (twenty three to thirty two) outline the minor triad on E. The coda of the passacaglia ends in G major, and as the fundamental pitches of the ostinato repetitions outline the triads C E^{b} (G), D F A, E G B, the tonal structure of the ostinato may be regarded as iv-v-vi-I.

This organization of tonal centres is a means of creating cohesion in the passacaglia as a whole.

2.2.7 Other variations of the ostinato theme

In addition to the freedom of rhythm and fundamental pitch (see paragraphs 2.2.5 and 2.2.6 above) the ostinato theme is also subjected to inversion and elision.

Inversion occurs in statements twelve and thirteen at the words "Beauty you'd better go back, you'd better go back". The suggestion of turning back is symbolized by the inversion of the theme.

Elision between successive statements of the ostinato occurs at the peak of the formal arch profile between statements twenty three and twenty four, twenty five and twenty six, twenty seven and twenty eight. This speeding up of successive appearances of the ostinato is a means of adding intensity and excitement at the peak of the arch profile.

Sequential treatment of the final two notes of the ostinato occurs in statement twenty two.

2.2.8 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

The only occasions on which the ostinato theme drops out are during Billy's short recitative "Billy Budd late of the *Rights o' Man*, and soon to be Captain of the mizzen!", and during the coda which constitutes the final six measures of the passacaglia. Billy's recitative occurs between statements nineteen and twenty of the ostinato, that is, shortly after the midpoint of the passacaglia, when the upward curve of the arch profile is well under way.

The return of the ostinato following this short break gives added impetus to the upward curve which reaches a peak in statements twenty three to twenty eight.

The extension of statement twenty two by sequential repetition of the final two notes of the ostinato theme, is not so much a fragmentation of the ostinato theme, as an extension of it.

2.2.9 Degree of audibility

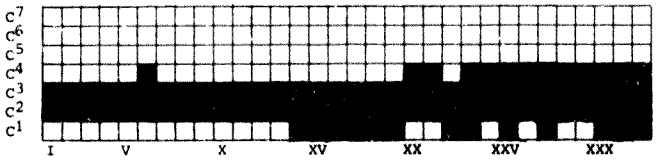
Despite the changes to the theme discussed above, the ostinato never becomes unrecognizable due to the fact that the changes are never very severe, and also to the fact that these changes do not result in the

ostinato theme becoming thematically remote. With the exceptions of statements twelve and thirteen in which the ostinato is presented in inversion, all the other statements present it in its original thematic form.

The preservation of the original rhythm when the ostinato is presented in an inverted form, allows it to remain recognizable.

2.2.10 Octave register

Ex. 6: Octave register of ostinato



The ostinato is confined to the bass registers throughout.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are thirty two statements of the ostinato theme. The original rhythmic setting which holds good for the first twenty two statements (with elision between statements twenty one and twenty two) is a two measure setting in 6/8 metre. Despite the rhythmic changes from statement twenty three to the end, only statement thirty two (the final presentation of the ostinato) exceeds the original two measure length.

The overall length of this passacaglia is seventy six measures. The overall time-span is 2.47 minutes. [5]

---

[5] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *Billy Budd*, with Peter Pears, Michael Langdon, Peter Glossop, John Shirley-Quirk, Bryan Drake, and others, cond. Benjamin Britten, London Symphony Orchestra, Decca SET 379-381, 1968.

2.3.2 Sectionalization

In its original form, this ostinato theme is diatonic in the key of E flat major. It is, furthermore, diatonic in all the subsequent keys in which it is presented. Consequently, it has a bland quality and creates a minimum of sectional effect. The mediant ending of the ostinato also lessens the sectional effect of constant repetitions because it creates forward momentum.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

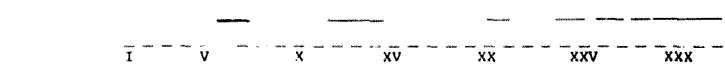
This passacaglia is grouped into blocks of uniform key and accompaniment texture, as follows:

I	:	E flat	Statements	I	-	V
II	:	C (predominantly)	Statements	VI	-	XIV
III	:	f (predominantly)	Statements	XV	-	XIX
IV	:	d	Statements	XX	-	XXII
V	:	G	Statements	XXIII	-	end.

The most significant accompaniment theme corresponds to the ostinato itself, and recurs sporadically during the course of the passacaglia, always sung by Dansker's bass voice, and this serves as a unifying factor. This motive becomes more and more of a unifying factor as the passacaglia progresses, due to the fact that it appears more frequently and for longer periods of time.

The most significant accompanying theme, is therefore, that of a single motive or theme which corresponds to the ostinato itself.

Ex. 7: Recurrence of ostinato theme in accompaniment



For the rest, the accompaniment consists of Billy's baritone arioso supported predominantly by the woodwind. The accompaniment

falls into sections which correspond with the tonal sections of the passacaglia.

The first section (statements one to five) is characterized by the doubling of Billy's vocal line on clarinets, violas and cellos with figuration on the flutes.

The second section (statements six to fourteen) is dominated by sixteenth note arpeggio passages and syncopated figuration on the woodwind supporting Billy's vocal line.

In the third section (statements fifteen to nineteen), Billy's vocal line is doubled and slightly figured by the woodwind and violas with occasional interjections by the trumpets.

In the following section (statements twenty to twenty two) the dotted sixteenth note and thirty-second note figuration of the previous section is continued, but no longer doubles Billy's ariosa. The trumpet interjections become more frequent.

Section five (statements twenty three to twenty eight) sees the alternation of a homorhythmic passage on woodwind, brass and timpani with Billy's ariosa doubled by the violins.

Statements twenty nine to thirty two (section six) sees the use of sustained chords on the woodwind and brass with Billy's vocal line doubled on the violins.

The coda consists of running sixteenth note passages reminiscent of Billy's vocal line from statement twenty nine to thirty two, and culminates in three measures of fortissimo dotted quarter notes.

The emphasis on the interval of a perfect fourth in Billy's arioso, either as a direct leap, or by strategic placement of its notes within stepwise movement links this arioso with Dansker's motive which forms the main accompanying theme and which is based directly on the ostinato theme itself.

Thus, this passacaglia has a very tightly-knit structure.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

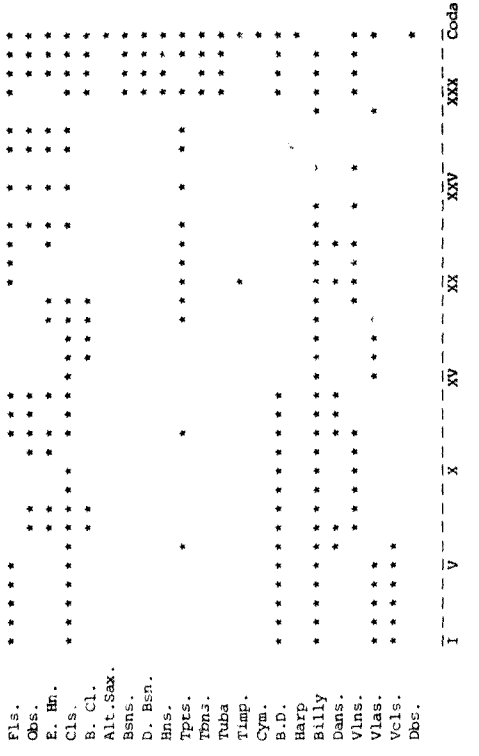
The ostinato theme remains below the level of the accompaniment throughout the passacaglia. As the ostinato is not static but is transposed to eight different fundamental pitches during the course of the passacaglia, the accompaniment follows the ostinato's rises so that it remains constantly above the ostinato.

3.2.2 Tone colour

The tone colour of the accompaniment shows the use of additive crescendo with interruptions. The height of this crescendo occurs in the final three statements of the ostinato theme. Smaller peaks in the tone colour occur in statements seven and twelve.

Following the first five statements of the ostinato which all have identical tone colour in the accompaniment, Britten does not repeat an accompanying tone colour for more than two statements successively. This use of constantly changing tone colours adds interest and vitality to the accompaniment.

Ex. 8: Tone colour of accompaniment



3.2.3 Texture

Gradual changes of texture predominate in this passacaglia, but there are, nevertheless, several abrupt changes, for example, at Billy's unaccompanied arioso at the end of statement nineteen of the ostinato theme. From statements twenty three to statement twenty eight, during the peak of the formal arch profile, two strongly contrasting textures alternate and this necessitates an abrupt change from one texture to the other at the beginning of each statement of the ostinato theme. These abrupt changes of texture at the peak of the arch profile are a means of infusing additional tension and vitality at the most dramatic point of the passacaglia.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

For the most part, the sectional effect of the constant reiterations of the ostinato is counteracted by the accompaniment which overlaps the repetitions. At times, Dansker's theme coincides with that of the ostinato, but on such occasions Billy's arioso and the orchestral accompaniment overlap these divisions and thus minimize the sectional effect.

The only point at which a strong sectional effect is in evidence is at the peak of the arch contour (statements twenty three to twenty eight). Here, the alternation of the ostinato theme with a homorhythmic accompaniment, with Billy's arioso doubled on the violins, creates a strongly sectional effect.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

There is a delicate balance between the ostinato theme and the accompaniment throughout this passacaglia. Neither one dominates the other. In the initial stages of the passacaglia, the accompaniment is in the foreground, but as the passacaglia progresses the ostinato theme becomes more and more prominent until, at the peak of the arch contour, the ostinato theme is the dominant element. The increasing importance given to the ostinato theme creates the rise of the arch profile. There is thus a variable relationship between the ostinato theme and the accompaniment.

3.3.3 *Grouping*

Grouping in this passacaglia is effected by the various accompanying textures and rhythms as follows:

Statements one to five
Statements six to fourteen
Statements fifteen to twenty two
Statements twenty three to twenty eight
Statements twenty nine to thirty two.

Thus, the smaller unit of the ostinato theme is transcended by the larger units of accompanying material each of which spans several statements of the ostinato, and which, at the same time, generate forward momentum.

4. MOTION FACTORS

4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

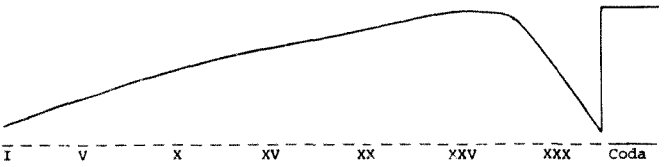
The changes in density in this passacaglia are generally made in stages which correspond with the different accompanying textures. The first three stages (statements one to five, six to eleven and twelve to fourteen) each see a progressive increase in density. There is a drop off at the beginning of section four (statement fifteen) but statement eighteen sees a further increase followed by an interruption during Billy's short recitative at the end of statement nineteen. This interruption is immediately followed by a resumption of the upward density curve at the beginning of section five (statement twenty).

The peak of the density profile is reached in statement twenty three. This peak is maintained through statements twenty five, twenty seven and twenty eight, and is thrown into relief by the very low density of the intervening statements (twenty four and twenty six).

Thereafter, there is a marked decline in density (statements twenty nine to thirty two).

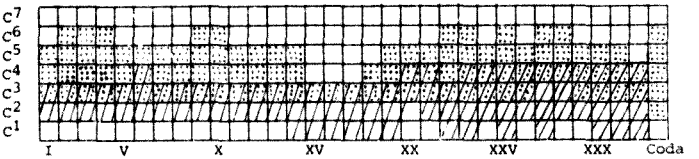
The coda, however, sees a sudden dramatic increase in density so that the density profile ends on a highpoint.

Ex. 9: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 10: Range (/// = ostinato; :: = accompaniment)



The ostinato is the lowest sounding part throughout. The accompaniment, however, has considerably more freedom to exploit the upper registers in particular. In the initial stages of the passacaglia the accompaniment sees only slight shifts of register. However, at statement fifteen, there is a marked narrowing of the range of the accompaniment.

This narrowing of the range helps to avoid monotony on the long upward curve of the arch profile, and is followed by a fairly rapid widening of the range as the peak of the arch is approached. This peak is followed by a gradual reduction in the range span of the accompaniment on the downward curve of the arch profile. However, the coda which follows sees a sudden dramatic increase in range to its widest in this passacaglia.

Thus, in general, the changes in range-span are made gradually with the exception of the sudden narrowing in statement fifteen, and the equally sudden widening in the coda.

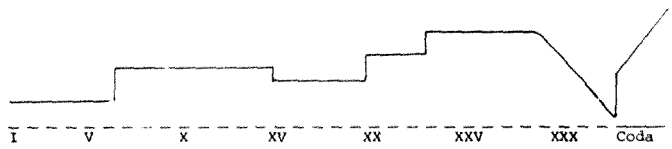
4.1.3 Dynamics

The dynamic changes are made in stages on the upward curve of the arch reaching a peak in statement twenty three, and this peak is maintained for six statements after which there is a gradual decline in the dynamic level, reaching its lowest point in the final statement of the ostinato. Following this, however, there is a sudden rapid rise in the dynamic level in the coda, so that dynamically the passacaglia ends on a highpoint.

Within these stages, however, Britten makes use of occasional waves which add interest and variety to the dynamic profile.

On the upward curve of the dynamic arch profile, the progressive growth is interrupted at statement fifteen. However, this interruption is short-lived and creates a breathing space before the final thrust to the peak of the arch contour.

Ex. 11: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic parameter of this passacaglia shows an increase by stages until statement twenty three. At this point, which represents the peak of the arch profile, there is a marked drop in rhythmic activity, and this lower rate of rhythmic activity is carried through to statements twenty five, twenty seven and twenty eight.

Thus, there is a drop in rhythmic activity at the peak of the arch profile, a point at which the parameters of density and dynamics are at a highpoint.

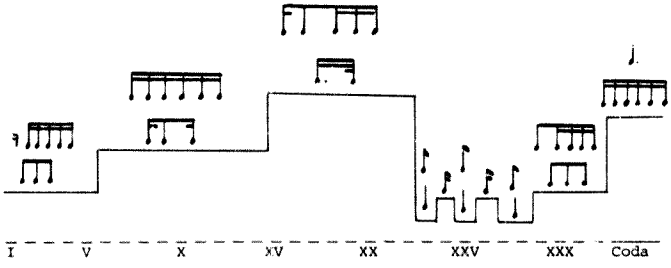
On the downward curve of the arch profile the accompaniment once again resumes a more active rhythm and this infuses vitality while the other parameters are declining.

The rhythm of the ostinato, however, shows a marked decline during this downward curve and thus, despite the rhythmically active accompany-

ing material, a feeling of broadening is, nevertheless, imparted. Thus, by the end of the final statement of the ostinato a feeling of repose and conclusiveness has been established.

The six measure coda which follows is perhaps not so much a concluding gesture for the passacaglia as for Act I as a whole. It sees a sudden marked increase in all the parameters including rhythm. In the final three measures, however, the rhythmic activity holds back and thus creates a broadening effect with which to conclude the movement.

Ex. 12: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The parameters of both density and dynamics follow an overall arch profile reaching a peak in statements twenty three to twenty eight.

The range, having seen a marked narrowing at statement fifteen, gradually widens again and at statement twenty two reaches its maximum again in anticipation of the peak of the arch. Thereafter, it sees a gradual narrowing until the end of the passacaglia. The coda sees a dramatic widening of the range.

The rhythmic activity follows a gradual rise profile until the peak of the arch where there is a sudden pulling back while the other parameters are at a high point.

The coda which follows the passacaglia sees all the parameters at a high level. This coda, however, is not so much a conclusion to the passacaglia, which has a complete arch profile within itself, as it is a conclusion to Act I of this opera.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

This passacaglia follows an arch profile and ends with all the parameters at a lowpoint.

The rhythmic spacing of the ostinato in the final statement has a broadening effect and creates a feeling of slowing down and finality without there being any change in the overall tempo.

The coda which follows the passacaglia sees a sudden rise in all the parameters. However, this coda functions as a conclusion to the entire act of the opera, rather than as the conclusion of the passacaglia.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal plan of this passacaglia is that of an arch profile.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia concludes the first act of this two act opera. It therefore occurs in a central position within the overall framework of the opera, and forms the highpoint of the first act.

The tonal scheme of the opera is as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

- Act I : B^{b} - C - $\underline{E^{b}}$ - $\underline{G}$
- Act II : B^{b} - D - F - E - B^{b}.

The passacaglia sets out in E flat major but ends in G major which is the concluding tonality of the first act. It therefore allows for excursions into tonal centres which are not heard again at structurally important points of the opera.

The opening E^{b} tonality of the passacaglia, furthermore, stands in a semitonal relationship to the execution scene in the second act, centred on E, which it foreshadows. It could thus be regarded as symbolizing the irreconcilability of the situation between Claggart and Billy.

CHAPTER 10

THE TURN OF THE SCREW, OP. 54, 1954

1. BACKGROUND

Like *Albert Herring* and *The Rape of Lucretia*, *The Turn of the Screw* is a chamber opera. It is in two acts with sixteen scenes. It was given its world premiere in Venice on 14 September 1954, while in America it was premiered in New York on 19 March 1958.

The libretto, written by Myfanwy Piper, was based on the novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James (1843-1916). The action takes place at Bly, a country house, about the middle of the nineteenth century.

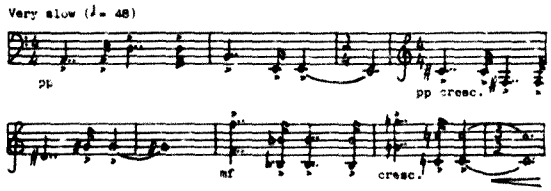
> *The Turn of the Screw* is about the haunting of two children in a Victorian Country house by the ghosts of a valet and the governess he has seduced. Its choice by Britten is usually interpreted as another example of his preoccupation with evil and corruption, but this aspect may well have been exaggerated. What is more pertinent is that the Britten family always displayed a remarkable curiosity about the occult and that he grew up in this atmosphere. He frequently claimed to have had 'premonitions' and he could usually be drawn into a conversation about 'curious happenings'. Suffolk, after all, is a good country for haunted houses.[1]

The eight scenes of each act are linked together by sixteen orchestral interludes which take the form of a theme and fifteen variations. The theme of the variations encompasses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. It is given out on the piano. However, each note is then sustained by another instrument so that, by the end of the theme, all twelve notes are sounding simultaneously.

---

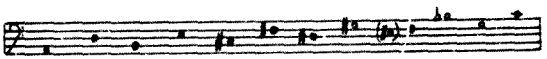
[1] M. Kennedy, *Britten* (London: Dent, 1981), p. 67.

Ex. 1: Theme of variations [2]



As can be seen in Ex. 1 above, the theme consists of three asymmetrical phrases. The first of these phrases is transposed and inverted in the second phrase, and this inversion is then treated sequentially in the third phrase.

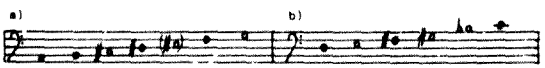
Ex. 2: Scheme of melodic structure of theme of variations



The theme thus consists of twelve notes in which there is an alternation of perfect fourths and minor thirds. In the theme (see Ex. 1, above), the intervals are sometimes inverted so that the perfect fourths appear as perfect fifths and the minor thirds appear as major sixths.

The theme can also be regarded as consisting of two whole tone scales, one formed from the upper notes and one from the lower notes.

Ex. 3: Scale structure of theme of variations



> Britten neither here nor elsewhere has regarded the twelve notes as constituting a negation of tonal hierarchies, but rather as a ramification of them.

---

[2] B. Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, Op. 54, study score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1966), p. 4.

> What he sees in a note-row is not so much equality but *totality:* almost every one of his twelve-note ideas is in some sense a symbol of an *all* — a cosmos, one might more pompously say; ... But within any given context, however rapidly fluctuating central notes may be, they are allowed to exercise their old powers of attraction. And since Britten rarely permits his harmony to stray further than the ear can retrace from a triadic norm, this twelve-note melodic material takes us nowhere towards Schoenberg's dissolution of the motive in the texture with its consequent abandonment of functionally directed harmony. [3]

It has been suggested that Britten was influenced by Berg's *Wozzeck*.

> The obsessive, though not of course serial, schemes of *Wozzeck* may have been in Britten's mind: certainly *Wozzeck* is the most obvious and important precedent for the use of elaborate structuring to control and concentrate the intense emotional content of a music drama. [4]

Each variation sets the mood for the scene that follows it, and there are sometimes thematic links as well between a variation and the subsequent scene.

The opera is scored for wind and string quintets plus harp, celesta and percussion. There are only seven characters and there is no chorus.

The climax of the opera in the final scene of Act II is a passacaglia on an ostinato built up cumulatively from the note succession of the theme of the variations (see Ex. 1, p. 152).

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

1 STRUCTURE

As is mentioned above, the ostinato, *theme* is built up cumulatively from the notes of the theme for variations. The first six notes appear in the first eight statements of the ostinato. In the next four statements, the ostinato is extended to include the first eight notes of the theme. Then, in statement thirteen immediately following Miles's

---

[3] Evans, p. 206.

[4] Whittall, p. 159.

admission, there is a short statement containing only the first four notes of the theme for variations.

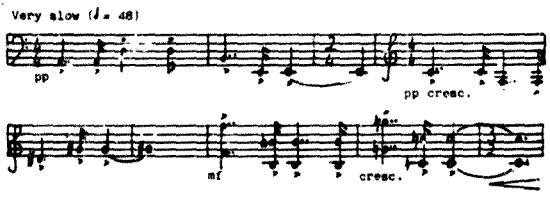
The following statement of the ostinato contains the first nine notes of the theme for variations, and this is followed by a statement with ten notes.

Statements sixteen and seventeen of the ostinato, as the struggle between the Governess and Quint intensifies, contain all twelve notes of the theme for variations.

2.1.1 Sequence

The theme as stated at the outset of the variations in the Prologue to Act I, consists of three asymmetrical phrases. There are no exact melodic sequences. The second phrase is a transposed inversion of the first. The third phrase is an exact melodic sequence of the second apart from the final C natural which, although it gives the correct pitch class, falls a perfect fifth instead of rising a perfect fourth.

Ex. 4: Theme of variations [5]



Rhythmic sequence is prominent in the original theme (see Ex. 4, above). In the passacaglia, however, only the initial two presentations of the ostinato are rhythmically identical. The remaining fifteen statements each present the ostinato in a new rhythmic guise.

Ex. 5: Rhythmic structure of first two statements of ostinato



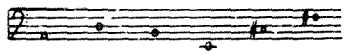
---

[5] Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 4.

2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

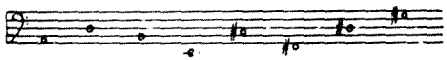
The first eight statements of the ostinato theme retain a constant intervallic structure. Statement nine also conforms to the interval structure of the previous eight statements, however, it omits the third note (B^2).

Ex. 6: Interval structure of first eight statements of ostinato



In statements ten, eleven and twelve, the interval structure is as follows:

Ex. 7: Interval structure of statements ten, eleven and twelve of ostinato



Statement nine has the same interval structure as statements ten, eleven and twelve, but the third note (B^2) is omitted.

Statement thirteen has only the first four notes of the ostinato, but the interval structure of these notes corresponds with that of all previous statements.

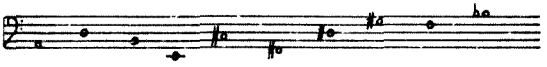
Statement fourteen retains the interval structure of statements ten, eleven and twelve (see Ex. 7 above) but adds a further note of the theme at the end.

Ex. 8: Interval structure of statement fourteen of ostinato



Statement fifteen adds an additional note (note ten) of the theme.

Ex. 9: Interval structure of statement fifteen of ostinato



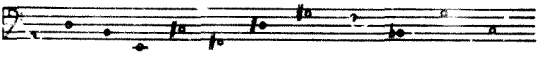
Statement sixteen retains this tructure but adds notes eleven and twelve of the theme.

Ex. 10: Interval structure of statement sixteen of ostinato



Statement seventeen also contains all twelve notes of the theme, but the final three notes alter the interval structure of the previous statement.

Ex. 11: Interval structure of statement seventeen of ostinato



Thus, broadly speaking, the first nine statements have the same interval structure. Thereafter, statements ten to sixteen have the same structure with the addition of one note at the end of statement fourteen and another at the end of statement fifteen. A further two notes are added at the end of statement sixteen, which therefore incorporates all twelve notes of the theme. The structure of statements sixteen and seventeen is identical for the first nine notes, but the final notes see a slight change of structure.

From the above examples of the interval structure of the ostinato (Exs. 6 to 11 above), it is evident that the only intervals used are those of rising perfect fourths and falling minor thirds (or augmented seconds) or their inversions, namely, falling perfect fifths and rising major sixths.

This concentration on specific intervals gives a highly unified structure to the ostinato theme.

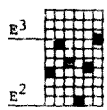
2.1.3 Chordal influence

Those statements which use a falling perfect fifth can be regarded as outlining a major or minor triad on E between notes three and four, and on F sharp between notes five and six. The final statement outlines two further major triads on B flat and C respectively between notes nine to ten and eleven to twelve.

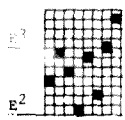
2.1.4 Contour

Ex. 12: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)

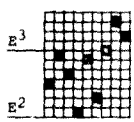
a) Statements I-IX



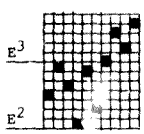
b) Statements X-XII



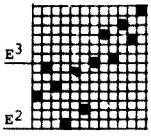
c) Statement XIV



d) Statement XV



e) Statement XVI



The above graphs of the contour show that the ostinato moves on three levels. Each of these levels has a rising contour. Furthermore, the middle level moves entirely by rising whole tones until, by statement sixteen, a complete whole tone scale has been encompassed.

As a result of the cumulative method of presenting the ostinato the interval between the final note of one statement and the first note of the following statement does not remain constant. Statements one to eight have the interval of a major sixth between the final note and the first note of the following statement. In statements nine to twelve the connecting interval is a major seventh, while in statement thirteen (which presents only the first four notes of the theme) the interval is a perfect fourth. From this point on, the connecting interval gradually widens to a minor sixth in statement fourteen, a minor ninth in statement fifteen and a minor tenth in statement sixteen.

Thus, the most frequently used connecting interval is the major sixth.

2.1.5 Length

Unlike any other Britten passacaglia the notes of this ostinato theme are presented cumulatively so that by the final two statements all twelve notes of the theme are present. The ostinato theme is stated seventeen times.

To begin with, only six notes are present. Two more notes are added at statement ten, and a further one at each of statements fourteen and fifteen, bringing the number up to ten notes. In statement sixteen the final two notes are added.

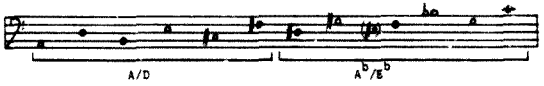
Both the cumulative method of presenting the theme and the constantly changing rhythmic character of the ostinato in each statement (apart from statements one and two which have the same rhythm)

create a constantly changing theme length. The fluctuation in length varies from three measures (statements one and two) to twenty six measures (statement seventeen).

2.1.6 Tonal centre

Stein has suggested that each half of the ostinato theme can be regarded as belonging to a single key: the first half to A (or D) and the second half to A flat (or E flat). [6]

Ex. 13: Tonality of ostinato



2.1.7 Metre and tempo

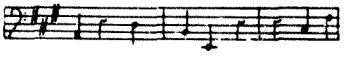
The theme is initially presented in simple triple metre (3/4) and with the tempo indication "Slow and regular (♩ = 80)".

At statement fifteen, however, there is a change to 4/4 and 5/4 metres. The final statement (seventeen) sees both the metre and tempo indication change to 2/8, "Quick and urgent".

2.1.8 Rhythm

Apart from statements one and two which are presented in an identical rhythmic form, the remaining statements of the ostinato are in a state of constant rhythmic flux, never duplicating the rhythmic structure of any other statement.

Ex. 14: Rhythmic structure of first two statements of ostinato



Despite the fairly subdued rhythmic activity of the above example, none of the three measures duplicates the rhythmic activity of any other. This, furthermore, is a feature of nearly all the presentations

---

[6] E. Stein, "The Turn of the Screw and its Musical Idiom," *Tempo*, 34, 1954-55, p. 6.

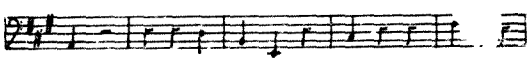
of the ostinato. Only in statements seven, eight and seventeen does the same rhythmic pattern appear in more than one measure.

Ex. 15: Rhythmic structure of statements seven, eight and seventeen of ostinato

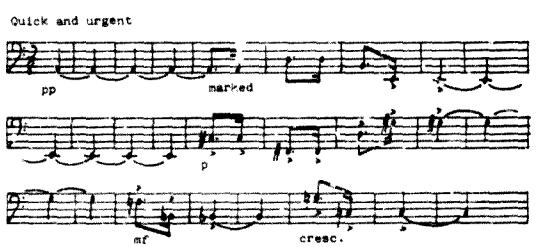
a) Statement VII [7]



b) Statement VIII [8]



c) Statement XVII [9]



An interesting feature is the increasing rhythmic activity in the final four statements of the ostinato. The most rhythmically active statement is number sixteen.

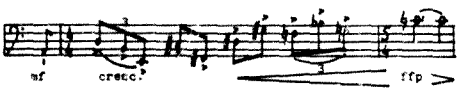
---

[7] Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, pp. 294-295.

[8] Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 295.

[9] Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, pp. 306-310.

Ex. 16: Statement sixteen of ostinato



This constantly changing rhythmic structure of the ostinato is a means of infusing interest and vitality into the constant repetitions of the ostinato.

'odic tension

.t the fact that the ostinato is based on a theme co.t ining ali .ve notes of the chromatic scale, despite the cumulat presentation of the ostinato, obviously no statement can end o.. .s same note as that with which the following statement begins. The connecting intervals in order of size are perfect fourth, minor sixth, major sixth, major seventh, minor ninth and minor tenth.

This, all the presentations are open-ended, and this creates a forward momentum.

2.1.10 Derivation

The ostinato theme is derived from the theme of the variations which is presented in the Prologue of the opera (see Ex. 4, p. 154). A feature about the presentation of this theme in the ostinato is that the French overture-like dotted rhythms are abandoned, except in statement seventeen (see Ex. 15(c), p. 160), in favour of a much less active, more placid rhythm.

The most striking feature about the presentation of this theme in the ostinato is the change from simple quadruple metre to simple triple (3/4) metre for the first fifteen statements. A change of metre to 4/4 and 3/4 occurs in statement sixteen (Ex. 16, above), and a further change to 2/8 occurs in statement seventeen (Ex. 15(c), p. 160). Nevertheless, by far the greater part of the passacaglia is in the traditional 3/4 metre.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement of the ostinato on harp, double bass and timpani is accompanied. In this instance, the accompaniment consists of the soprano voice of the Governess.

2.2.2 Variations in length

The length of each presentation of the ostinato is in a constant state of flux. This is due partly to the cumulative presentation of the ostinato. However, even in statements which contain the same number of pitch classes, the length varies widely. Thus, in the eight statements which present only six of the twelve pitch classes, the length varies from three to eight measures. In the two statements which contain all twelve pitch classes (statements sixteen and seventeen), there is a fluctuation of twenty four measures. In statement sixteen, the twelve pitch classes are contained within two measures, whereas in statement seventeen, the same twelve pitch classes are spread over twenty six measures.

These constant changes in the length of the presentations results from a less rigid approach based on a flexible theme length.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

In contrast to the constant fluctuations in the length of the ostinato theme, only five tone colours are used in the seventeen statements.

Ex. 17: Tone colour of ostinato

I	V	X	XV	
Harp	Harp	Bsn.		Timp.
Timp.	Timp.	Harp		Vlns.
Db.	Vcl.	Timp.		Vla.
	Db.	Vcl.		Vcl.
		Db.		Db.
			Bsn.	
			Hn.	
			Harp	
			Timp.	
			Vla.	
			Vcl.	
			Db.	

Britten here uses the additive method of building a crescendo.

2.2.4 Tempo changes

The initial tempo indication is "Slow and regular (♩ = 80)". This tempo is maintained until statement seventeen, the final presentation of the ostinato, where the indication is "Quick and urgent" and the metre changes to 2/8.

2.2.5 Variations in rhythm

The rhythmic structure of the ostinato is in a constant state of flux and only statements one and two are rhythmically identical.

2.2.6 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

The ostinato theme drops out for two short periods, namely for four measures between statements twelve and thirteen, and for three measures between statements fourteen and fifteen.

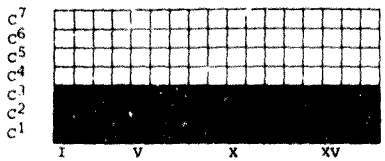
After the climax at statement seventeen, the ostinato theme drops out completely and is not heard again. The cumulative treatment of the ostinato (which may be regarded as a type of fragmentation) has already been mentioned (see paragraph 2.1.5, pp. 158-159).

2.2.7 Degree of audibility

The cumulative method of presenting the ostinato, as well as the new rhythmic structure for each presentation, with the exception of statement two, make the ostinato more obscure than it would be with a straightforward presentation. Nevertheless, despite the liberties which are taken with the ostinato, its presence in the lower registers throughout, does make an impact on one's aural perception, and it acts as a unifying element throughout the movement.

2.2.8 Octave register

Ex. 18: Octave register of ostinato



The ostinato remains in the lower registers for the entire passacaglia.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

The total length of the ostinato has very little influence on the length of the passacaglia as a whole due to the cumulative method used to introduce it, and also to the constantly changing rhythmic structure of the presentations (only statements one and two have identical rhythm).

A further factor which lessens the direct relationship between the ostinato theme length and the overall passacaglia length, is the fact that the theme drops out at the climax of the passacaglia and is not heard again for the remaining thirteen measures.

The overall length of the passacaglia is one hundred and twenty eight measures. The overall time-span is 5.46 minutes. [10]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

The constant fluctuations in the length, rhythm and audibility of the ostinato minimize the sectional effect of its repetitions.

---

[10] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, with Peter Pears, Jennifer Vyvyan, Joan Cross, Arda Mandikian, Olive Dyer, and others, cond. Benjamin Britten, English Opera Group Orchestra, Decca GOM 560-561, 1968.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

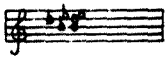
3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

The accompaniment consists of several counterpoints. None of these counterpoints ever reaches the status of a theme.

The arioso of each of the three participants in this scene, the Governess, Miles and Quint, is associated with a specific counterpoint and a specific sonority. Miles is associated with a counterpoint on the strings in which dotted rhythms predominate. The Governess is associated with broken triads on the clarinet, at first only in triplet quavers, but later also in shorter note values.

Quint is associated with the sound of the celesta and the chord which has been associated with him throughout the opera, namely, a minor third plus a whole tone. Apart from a few passages in which the celesta echoes Quint's call to Miles consisting of filled in perfect fourths, the entire accompaniment to Quint consists of Quint's chord either broken up or in block form.

Ex. 19: Quint's chord [11]



With the exception of the final variation in which the ostinato itself takes over the dotted rhythms associated with Miles, the accompanying counterpoints are rhythmically more active than the ostinato.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

Throughout the passacaglia the accompaniment appears above the ostinato, apart from a few notes in Quint's tenor vocal line in the final variation which drop slightly below the level of the ostinato.

The octave register in which the ostinato is presented remains static throughout.

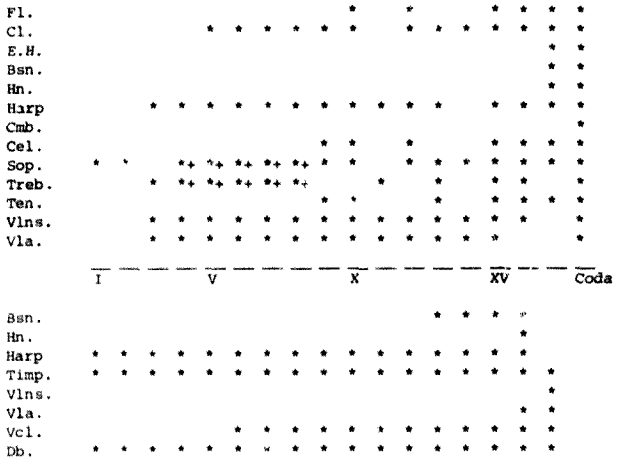
---

[11] Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 121.

3.2.2 Tone colour

The overall profile of the tone colour of the accompaniment is that of a gradual rise with interruptions in statements eleven and fourteen.

Ex. 20: Tone colour of accompaniment and ostinato (+ equals used in alternation)



3.2.3 Texture

In this passacaglia, Britten uses an additive method of textural growth. The textures merge rather than contrast with one another.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

The accompaniment minimizes the sectional character of the ostinato by overlapping the repetitions in all but three statements. The statements which are not overlapped are numbers thirteen, fifteen and seventeen.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

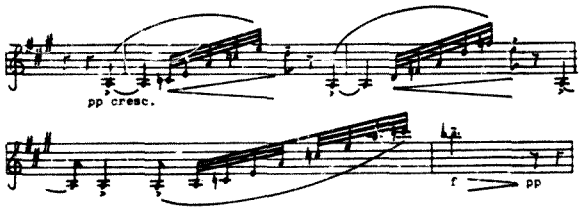
The accompaniment dominates the ostinato completely so that the ostinato is relegated to the role of providing rhythmic and harmonic support. The accompaniment is virtually self-sufficient and, as such, shapes the profile more or less single-handedly.

3.3.3 Grouping

The counterpoints with their characteristic rhythms, which are associated with the dialogue of the three characters, pervade the entire scene.

The one rhythm which is not characteristic of any of these counterpoints is the animated rhythm first heard on the clarinet in statement eight.

Ex. 21: Rhythm of clarinet in statement eight [12]



The last of these animated rhythmic patterns (see Ex. 21, above), occurs again in statement ten.

Similar urgent rhythms for the clarinet appear in three consecutive statements, namely fourteen, fifteen and sixteen. Thus, these rhythms become an ever-increasing unifying factor as the passacaglia progresses.

---

[12] Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, p. 295.

4. MOTION FACTORS

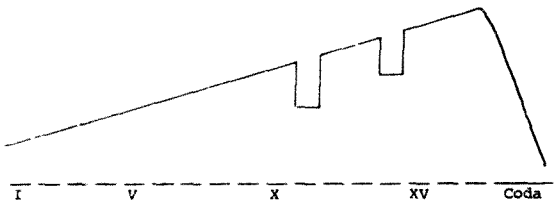
4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

The density changes are made progressively, and, apart from statements three, five, thirteen and fifteen, the changes do not coincide with the repetitions of the ostinato.

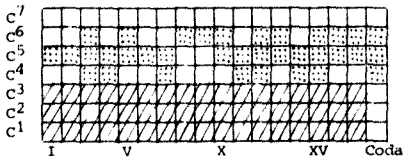
The density has an overall arch profile with slight interruptions on the upward curve at statements eleven and fourteen, namely during Miles's hesitation to reply to the Governess, and again following his admission. Following the climax at the end of statement seventeen, there is a gradual decline in density.

Ex. 22: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 23: R (/// = ostinato; ⁝ = accompaniment)



Throughout this passacaglia, the ostinato remains in the lower octave registers and at no time invades the upper registers.

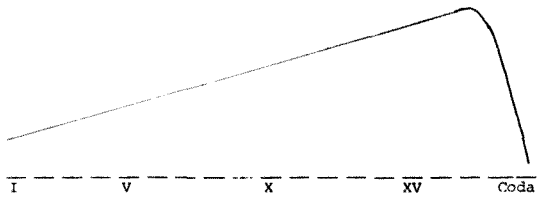
Gradual widening and narrowing of the upper limit of the range is characteristic of this passacaglia. As it progresses, the upper limit of the range wanders into the higher regions more frequently and remains there for longer periods than is the case in the opening stages.

The wide octave register range at the beginning of the coda gradually narrows in the closing stages of the passacaglia.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The overall dynamic contour is that of an arch reaching a peak at the end of statement seventeen, and thereafter dropping rapidly in the coda. Within this arch profile, however, the dynamic changes occur in waves of gradually increasing intensity.

Ex. 24: Dynamic profile

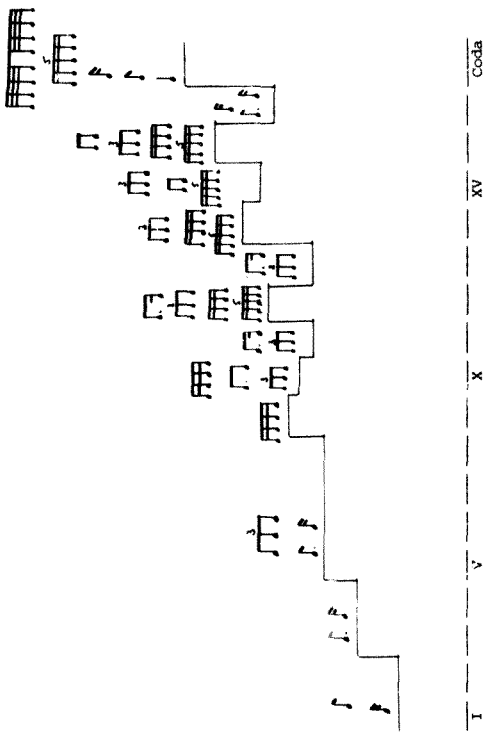


4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes occur in stages, reaching a peak at the beginning of the coda, and maintaining this level for the remainder of the passacaglia.

The overall rhythmic profile is, therefore, that of a gradual rise.

Ex. 25: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

Both the density and dynamics present an arch profile reaching a peak at the end of statement seventeen, and declining during the coda which follows.

The rhythm shows a deviation from this profile in that it pulls back during the peak of the arch and returns to a high level during the coda while the parameters of density and dynamics are on a decline. The rhythm, therefore, serves to create vitality while the other parameters are declining.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

The arch profile of this passacaglia results in a feeling of completion and rest being achieved by the end of the movement, with both the density and dynamics at a lowpoint. Thus, although the dramatic action continues immediately after a short pause, the passacaglia is complete in itself and does not depend on anything which follows for its sense of completion.

5. FORMAL PLAN

This passacaglia has an overall arch profile. Sixteen statements of the ostinato are required for the profile to reach a peak in statement seventeen. The decline is sharp and occurs during the coda.

5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia forms part of a longer work. It represents the climax of the opera and appears very nearly at the end of the work.

The tonal centres of the theme and its variations are as follows:

Act I

Theme:	A	Scene i:	A
Variation I:	B	Scene ii:	B
Variation II:	C	Scene iii:	C
Variation III:	D	Scene iv:	D
Variation IV:	E	Scene v:	E
Variation V:	F	Scene vi:	F
Variation VI:	G	Scene vii:	G
Variation VII:	A flat	Scene viii:	A flat

Act II

Variation VIII:	A flat	Scene i:	A flat
Variation IX:	F sharp	Scene ii:	F sharp
Variation X:	F	Scene iii:	F
Variation XI:	E flat	Scene iv:	E flat
Variation XII:	C sharp	Scene v:	C sharp
Variation XIII:	C	Scene vi:	C
Variation XIV:	B flat	Scene vii:	B flat
Variation XV:	A	Scene viii:	A (Passacaglia)

> ... the key centres are screwed up throughout the first act according to the succession of tone and semitone steps that form the Aeolian mode, but the final substitution of a semitone for the logical tone brings A flat in place of a return to A. Setting off from this A flat area, the second act unscrews its key succession in an exact inversion of the scalic steps of Act 1, that is, descending mixolydian on A flat. But an uncertainty attends the final stages of the return: the twice-heard A flat that dominated the peak of this key structure appears by now to have a far stronger grip on events than the distant A from which they originated, yet exact inversion of the upward screw will require a final semitonal step to A. [13]

At the opening of the passacaglia only notes one to six of the theme are used. These notes easily fit into a context of A major.

> ... but as longer circuits are attempted and the seventh and eighth notes appear, strong currents in the upper texture swing the music towards A flat. At the climax a final last statement of the theme on A is achieved despite being pitted against a superstructure now entirely in A flat. Thereafter great pedals ensure the domination of A to the end, and the A flat threat progressively weakens. [14]

In this opera, the tonal centre A represents the moral courage of the Governess, while the tonal centre of A flat represents the evil powers personified by the ghosts.

The passacaglia, therefore, re-establishes the tonal centre of A from which the work set out.

---

[13] Evans, p. 207.

[14] Evans, p. 207.

CHAPTER 11

NOYE'S FLUDDE, OP. 59, 1957

1. BACKGROUND

Noye's Fludde was first performed in the Orford Church, Orford (near Aldeburgh), on 18 June, 1958. The text of the play is taken from *English Miracle Plays, Moralities and Interludes*, ed. A.W. Pollard, 8th edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954). Britten added three well-known hymns which he rearranged,[1] as well as a chorus for the animals as they march into the ark.

The play tells the story of Noah and the flood, and is taken from the Chester Cycle, which is one of the four collections of English medieval plays known by the names of the towns in which they were probably performed. The other cycles are York, Coventry and Wakefield (which is sometimes referred to as the "Towneley" Cycle). These plays reached their fullest development in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and were performed on the great feastdays of Corpus Christi, Christmas, Whitsun and Easter. They were designed to illustrate the stories of the Bible for those who were illiterate. The plays were performed by individual guilds on large carts which could be pulled around the village from one square to the next. Unlike the liturgical drama from which they were derived, these Miracle Plays were not intended to be performed in church.

Britten aimed to reproduce the communal activity of the Miracle Plays, and thus old and young, professionals and amateurs are involved. The hymn singing of the congregation, the use of children and the employment of professional and amateur orchestral players are designed to involve everyone in participation. This idea of community involvement can lead to an enormous cast. Forty nine species of animals are mentioned in the Chester play, and when the work was premiered, Britten used thirty five species, in pairs, and subdivided into seven groups.

Only three adults are used, namely for the Voice of God (spoken), and for the parts of Noye (bass-baritone) and Noye's wife (contralto).

---

[1] The three hymns added were: *Lord Jesus think on me*, *Eternal Father, strong to save* and *The spacious firmament on high*.

Boys and girls between eleven and fifteen years of age play the parts of Sem, Ham and Jaffett and their wives, while older girls with strong voices especially in the lower registers, play the role of Mrs Noye's gossips.

The orchestra also calls for vast resources, both professional and amateur. There is a professional orchestra of ten players, two violins, viola, cello, double bass, treble recorder, piano (four hands), organ and timpani. In addition, the following amateur players are used: twenty five strings, twelve recorders, eight bugles, six percussion and six handbells.

Thus, the orchestra totals sixty seven players, ten professional and the others amateurs.

In addition to these vast resources, the audience is also called upon on three occasions to join in the singing of hymns.

The central movement in the opera is an extended passacaglia, which depicts musically the growth, climax and eventual subsidence of the storm. It makes use of all the above resources, representing as it does the flood at the height of the entire drama. It occurs at the dramatic peak of the overall arch profile of the work.

The *ripieno* orchestra comes into its own in this passacaglia movement with a wealth of descriptive effects strictly relevant to the musical logic of this superbly constructed movement.

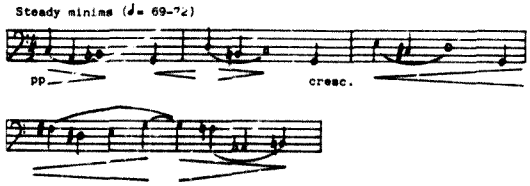
2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 Sequence

The ostinato theme consists of a single phrase, and is built from a three-note cell which always returns to the dominant pedal G. This three-note cell rises sequentially by steps of a whole tone until it reaches an apex from which it pitches back to the tonic note at the beginning of the repetition [illegible]to.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [2]



The tension of this theme is created by the conflicting tonal and atonal cross-currents set up by its intervallic structure.

In the final statement of the motive of a falling minor third to rising semitone, the rhythm is quickened. All the sequential appearances of the motive are exact with regard to pitch. In the fourth statement the motive is followed by the dominant pedal displaced up an octave.

This use of both pitch and rhythmic sequence creates a highly unified theme.

2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

As a result of the use of motivic sequence, the intervals of a falling minor third and rising semitone dominate this ostinato theme.

2.1.3 Tritone influence

A tritone in rising whole tones is outlined by the initial notes of the four successive statements of the ostinato theme motive. This tritone resolves to the dominant on the octave displaced dominant pedal.

2.1.4 Contour

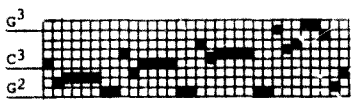
The gradual expansion of range with a rising upper limit results in a rising contour. Although there is a decline in contour over the final three quarter notes of the ostinato theme; the overall aural

---

[2] B. Britten, *Noye's Fludde*, Op. 59, study score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1958), p. 104.

impression is that of a rising contour. It could perhaps more accurately be termed a modified rising contour.

Ex. 2: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square represents one pitch class)



The above graphic illustration of the ostinato clearly shows that it is constructed on two levels, both of which rising. The upper level rises in successive equally spaced s . The lower level remains static until the last two quarter notes, when it too rises, and continues its rise to C^3 which marks the first note of the repetition of the ostinato theme.

A very smooth connection to the repetition of the theme is achieved by the leading note ending which resolves onto the tonic on the return of the ostinato theme. There is thus only a semitone step between the final note of the ostinato and the first note of its repetition.

The total range-span of the ostinato theme is narrow, being only a perfect octave.

2.1.5 Length

The ostinato theme is exactly four measures long, and thus conforms to the Baroque standard of four or eight measures.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

The tonal centre is clearly C, and this is strongly emphasized by the recurrent G's which form a dominant pedal point.

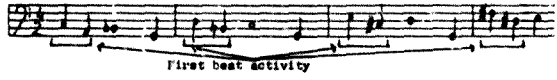
2.1.7 Metre and tempo

Contrary to the Baroque preference for triple metre, Britten here uses a simple quadruple metre (4/2). There is a specific metronome indication of ♩ = 69-72, and this tempo is maintained consistently throughout the passacaglia apart from a slight slackening of tempo in the final three measures.

2.1.8 Rhythm

An interesting rhythmic feature is Britten's use of first-beat activity in every measure. He also uses another tension-creating device, namely syncopation, as the contour of the theme expands.

Ex. 3: First beat activity of ostinato theme



2.1.9 Melodic tension

The leading note ending creates a particularly strong forward drive. Tension is created by the conflicting tonal and atonal cross currents set up by the ostinato's intervallic structure.

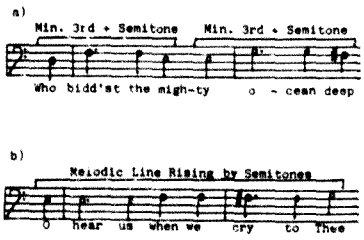
2.1.10 Rhythmic tension

Repetition of rhythmic motives creates a forward-thrusting, motoristic effect, thus creating momentum. Here, Britten uses the same rhythmic pattern three times in succession, and on its fourth appearance it is rhythmically accelerated.

2.1.11 Derivation

While this ostinato theme is not derived from any previously heard material, it has a very close affinity to lines three and five of the hymn tune *Eternal Father* which is heard approximately halfway through the passacaglia.

Ex. 4: Hymn tune *Eternal Father* [3]
a) Line 3
b) Line 5



In the ostinato theme, the rising minor third and falling semitone of line three of the hymn tune, is inverted to form a falling minor third and rising semitone. While the melodic line of line five of the hymn tune rises by semitones, the sequential repetition in the ostinato theme rises by whole tones.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement is unaccompanied apart from a roll on the timpani. Contrapuntal accompanying material appears on the fourth beat of the second statement.

2.2.2 Variations in length

The only variation in the length of the ostinato theme occurs in the final statement where only the first eleven notes of the nineteen-note theme are heard.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

The tone colour in the first six statements of the ostinato theme is static. Thereafter, in statements seven to fifteen inclusive, during

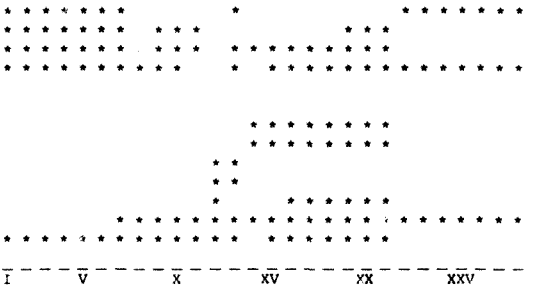
---

[3] Britten, *Noye's Fludde*, pp. 126-129. The hymn tune *Eternal Father* was composed by J.B. Dykes (1823-1876) with text by W. Whiting.

the instrumental build-up to the climax of the storm, there is a change of tone colour for every statement of the ostinato, except for the tenth statement, which retains the same instrumentation as the ninth.

This frequent change of tone colour creates vitality as well as a feeling of overall crescendo. This crescendo continues when the hymn tune "Eternal Father" appears, with a change of instrumentation for each of the first two verses, and reaches its climax in the third verse. As the storm subsides (statements 22-28) the instrumentation of the ostinato adopted in statement twenty two remains constant.

Ex. 5: Tone colour of ostinato



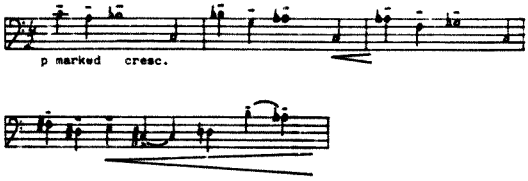
2.2.4 Tempo changes

This passacaglia retains a constant tempo throughout.

2.2.5 Other variations of the ostinato theme

At the "panic of the animals" (score number 80), there is a change from ascending sequences and a dominant pedal to descending sequences and a tonic pedal for two statements of the ostinato .

Ex. 6: Descending sequences (score number 80) [4]



The original form of the ostinato returns when, as the storm approaches its height, the chorus attempts to tame the elements with the first verse of the hymn tune (score number 82).

2.2.6 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

At the height of the flood, that is, in the third verse of the hymn tune, the ostinato theme is temporarily abandoned. There is, however, no drop in intensity at this point. As each of the two previous verses occupies three statements of the ostinato, the ostinato theme is absent for what would amount to the duration of three statements which is the equivalent of twelve measures. As the passacaglia is one hundred and eleven measures long, the theme is abandoned for only 10.9% of the movement.

Fragmentation of the ostinato occurs only in its final statement at which point only the first three measures are heard.

2.2.7 Degree of audibility

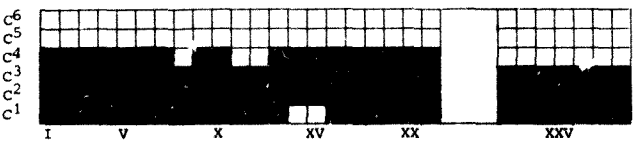
Despite the minor variation in the ostinato theme mentioned in 2.2.5, pp. 179-180, the ostinato remains distinguishable throughout. The theme functions as a true ostinato, and therefore, this passacaglia may be described as variations over an ostinato.

---

[4] Britten, *Noye's Fludde*, pp. 120-122.

2.2.8 Octave register

Ex. 7: Octave register of ostinato



From the above illustration it is clear that the ostinato theme remains in the bass and middle registers throughout.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

The four measure ostinato theme is stated twenty seven and a half times. The overall length of the passacaglia is one hundred and twenty three measures for twelve measures of which the ostinato is absent.

The overall time-span is 7.27 minutes. [5]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

This theme creates a fairly high degree of sectionalization due to its chromatic nature. On the other hand, the leading note ending tends to reduce sectionalization as it creates forward momentum. This ostinato, therefore, has a moderate sectional effect.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

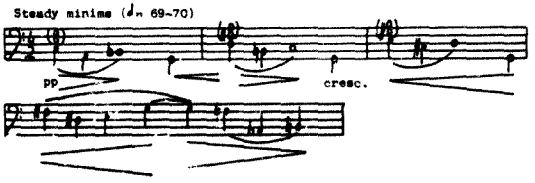
3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

Of considerable importance in this passacaglia is the implied series of block major triads in the ostinato theme, which is the source of much of the figuration and harmonic processes in this movement.

---

[5] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *Noye's Fludde*, with Owen Brannigan, Trevor Anthony and Sheila Rex, cond. Norman del Mar, English Chamber Orchestra, Decca, Argo ZKI, 1976.

Ex. 8: Ostinato theme with implied series of triads



The accompaniment figuration consists almost entirely of triads and scalic passages. These scalic passages can be traced back to the stepwise ascent of the falling minor third rising semitone motive of the ostinato theme. This passacaglia movement can therefore be regarded as having been derived from a single theme.

Throughout, the accompanying material is rhythmically more active than the ostinato.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

The accompaniment appears above the ostinato throughout.

3.2.2 Tone colour

There is a change of tone colour in the accompaniment for each of statements two to fifteen of the ostinato. There is a further change of tone colour in statement sixteen at the opening of the hymn "Eternal Father", and again at statement nineteen which marks the beginning of the second verse. Verse three of the hymn marks the climax of the movement, at which point the ostinato is abandoned for what would be the equivalent of three statements.

The constantly changing tone colour not only adds vitality, but is also the means used for an additive crescendo which reaches its peak in the third verse of the hymn. Thereafter, there is a gradual decline in intensity.

3.2.3 Texture

Throughout this passacaglia the textural changes merge into one another, resulting in a pattern of gradual growth up to and including the third verse of the hymn, and a pattern of gradual decline thereafter.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

There is a high degree of sectionalization in this passacaglia due to the fact that at each repetition of the ostinato, the accompaniment depicts some different aspect of the storm, for example, rain, thunder, wind. These changes in the accompanying material, coinciding as they do with each new statement of the ostinato, emphasize the sectional character of the ostinato.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

It is the accompaniment which is the dominant factor in this passacaglia, while the ostinato functions as a rhythmic and harmonic support.

3.3.3 Grouping

Statements fourteen and fifteen of the ostinato are grouped by retention of the same thematic accompanying material. Furthermore, at the height of the storm and of the passacaglia arch profile, the hymn tune "Eternal Father" is the unifying factor over six statements of the ostinato theme as well as during the following twelve measures during which the ostinato theme drops out.

Following the climax, during the height of the storm, the use of motives heard prior to the climax as well as from the hymn tune itself, creates a sense of return and unifies the arch profile of the passacaglia.

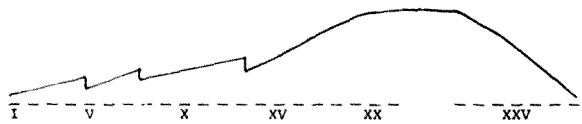
4. MOTION FACTORS

4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

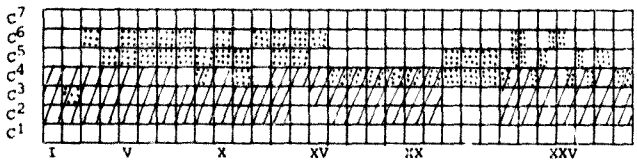
There is an overall increase in density from the second statement of the ostinato theme through to the climax in the third verse of the hymn. The density changes take place in stages which correspond with the repetitions of the ostinato. There are fluctuations within this gradually rising density level. Statement four represents the first small peak, followed by a drop in density and a build-up to statement seven, which is again followed by a drop and a further build-up to statements twelve and thirteen. The drop and subsequent build-up in statement fourteen of the ostinato through to statement nineteen and to the ensuing third hymn verse, brings the movement to its climax. Thereafter, there is an immediate drop and continued reduction in density to the end of the passacaglia.

Ex. 9: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 10: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁘ = accompaniment)



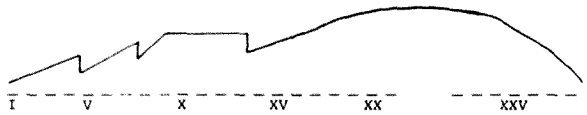
The above diagrammatic representation of the range according to octave register, illustrates that the range of the accompaniment follows an inverse arch curve. The narrowing of range during the climax corresponds

with the drop in rhythmic activity. The wide contrasts of range near the beginning and again at the end is part of the scheme of changing colour contrasts.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The dynamic gradations are made in stages. Up to and including statement eight of the ostinato, there is a change in the dynamic level for each statement, with a peak in statement four and again in statement seven. The cut-back in statement eight is followed by an increase which is retained at a more or less constant level in statements nine to thirteen inclusive. Statement fourteen at the beginning of the "panic of the animals" sees another significant cut-back which prepares for a final surge to the peak of the arch in the third verse of the hymn. Thereafter, there is a gradual tapering off of the dynamics on the downward curve of the arch.

Ex. 11: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes, like the density and dynamic changes are made in stages. There is a change of rhythmic values for almost every statement of the ostinato, and this tendency for rhythmic, density and dynamic changes to coincide with the repetitions of the ostinato creates a very strong sectional effect. The rapid changing of rhythmic values is halted somewhat during the "panic of the animals" (score number 80) during which the rhythmic values remain constant for two statements of the ostinato, and also during the hymn tune (score number 82) in which the rhythmic values remain constant for each verse, that is, for three statements of the ostinato in each of the first two verses, and for the equivalent of three statements of the ostinato in the third verse.

This retention of rhythmic values for longer time-spans as the peak of the arch is approached, creates momentum and diverts attention away from the constantly recurring ostinato.

Curiously enough, the rate of rhythmic change accelerates on the downward curve of the arch, especially in statements twenty three and twenty four, where the rhythm changes twice as quickly as before. This could be regarded as a means of creating a sense of finality by compressing the activity.

An interesting feature is the reduction of rhythmic activity at the peak of the arch when both density and dynamics are at a highpoint.

4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

There is an interesting interaction of parameters in this passacaglia. An arch contour is displayed by the density and dynamics, while an inverse arch is displayed by the rhythm and range. At the peak of the arch contour, the rhythmic activity and range are reduced within a high intensity and high density area.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

The sense of finality is achieved by the gradual drop in density and dynamics, and ultimately also a slowing down of the rhythm on the downward curve of the formal arch profile. The dramatic action continues immediately without a pause.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal contour of this passacaglia is that of an arch. The arch requires a considerable time to reach its peak. The eighteen statements of the upward contour are no doubt intended to suggest the slowly rising floodwaters. The peak is sustained for some time, namely, for the three verses of the hymn tune which constitute thirty six measures. Thereafter, there is a rapid descent to close the passacaglia.

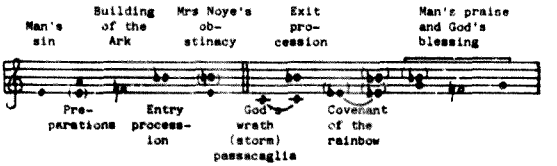
This descent is characterized by the return of motives and rhythmic figures heard during the upward curve of the arch profile, as well as by snatches of the hymn tune itself. This return of previously heard elements gives a feeling of rounding off and conclusion to the movement.

5.1 LARGER FORM

The central location of this passacaglia within the work as a whole, causes it to function as a tonal point.

Peter Evans has summarized the tonal procedures in this work as follows: [6]

Ex. 12: Tonal events (notes tied to bracketed notes indicate that those pitches are retained as significant pedals)



Peter Evans goes on to say: [7]

> E minor has remained the only minor mode used at a structural level of significance, and the transfer to its relative major to end the cycle is effectively symbolic of the change in man's state through which the story has led us.

The main tonal events of this work are therefore (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

- E minor
- C major ("Storm" passacaglia)
- G major (with which the work concludes).

These events correspond to the major triad built on the first note of the ostinato theme.

In its central position within the overall framework, the passacaglia serves to introduce a contrasting, but related, tonality between the opening E minor and its relative major, G major which concludes the work.

---

[6] Evans, p. 282.

[7] Evans, p. 282.

CHAPTER 12

WAR REQUIEM, OP. 66, 1961

1. BACKGROUND

The *War Requiem*, completed in 1961, was commissioned to mark the consecration of the new Cathedral of St. Michael in Coventry, England. The previous medieval building was bombed during the Second World War.

> When the new Cathedral was seen to be approaching completion, it was agreed to celebrate its rededication with a special festival of the arts. A number of new works were required for the occasion, including a large-scale oratorio; and this commission was offered to Britten who accepted it. He fully realized the importance of the occasion, for it would mark not only the phoenix-like resurgence of the new Cathedral at the side of the shattered shell of the old, but also the healing of many wounds. He wanted to make some public statement about the criminal futility of war, and this seemed a good opportunity to do so. [1]

Britten's *War Requiem* is perhaps the most powerful anti-war tract of modern times. It was first performed at the opening of the new Coventry Cathedral on 30 May 1962.

This Requiem is a setting of liturgical texts with commentary based on nine poems of Wilfred Owen (1893-1913) who died in the First World War.

The English poems are confined to the tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by chamber orchestra. The Latin texts, on the other hand, are distributed between two groups: the boys' choir with organ accompaniment, and the soprano soloist, chorus and full orchestra. Thus, Britten has employed three sound levels:

- the boys' voices represent a distant, almost de-personalized, mystic world completely removed from, and oblivious to, the battlefield;
- the soprano soloist, chorus and full orchestra represent bereaved humanity;

---

[1] White, p. 78.

- the tenor and baritone soloists accompanied by a chamber orchestra represent the victims of war.

The fifth movement of this work, the "Agnus Dei" is the summing up both musically and emotionally of the work's central message. It represents the climax of the work as a whole, and takes the form of a passacaglia.

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 *STRUCTURE*

The ostinato theme consists of two symmetrical fragments of filled-in perfect fifths from F sharp and C respectively, in opposite directions, and with the identical succession of tones and semitones. The initial notes of each of these two fragments are a tritone apart. Throughout this *War Requiem*, the tritone is used as the symbol of mourning.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [2]



2.1.1 Sequence

Actual sequence does not occur in this ostinato theme. However, the second measure is an exact retrograde of the first a semitone higher.

Britten's interesting rhythmic juggling with the five sixteenth notes in each measure eliminates the possibility of rhythmic sequence.

2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

The intervallic structure in both measures of the ostinato theme is identical. Each measure contains two tones followed by a semitone and another tone. This exact reflection of the intervals of the first measure in the second measure of the ostinato, results in an extremely tightly unified structure.

---

[2] B. Britten, *War Requiem*, Op. 66, study score (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1962), p. 170.

2.1.3 Chordal influence

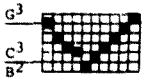
The first measure outlines the triad of B minor, while the second measure outlines the triad of C major.

2.1.4 Tritone influence

A tritone is formed between the first note of the first measure and the first note of the second measure.

2.1.5 Contour

Ex. 2: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one sixteenth note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The ostinato theme presents the contour of an inverse arch, reaching a lowpoint on the fifth sixteenth note of the first measure.

There is only a semitone interval between the submediant ending and the dominant opening of this theme. This narrow connecting interval allows for very smooth repetitions of the ostinato.

The range-span is a minor sixth.

2.1.6 Length

The ostinato theme is extremely short being only two measures in length. It is stated twenty three times.

2.1.7 Tonal centre

> The Agnus Dei is the only movement consistently controlled by a tritonal relationship. The impression of this ceaseless burden, sung or played is predominantly of B minor alternating with its Neapolitan sixth. [3]

One can therefore regard the tonal centre of the ostinato theme as being B minor. The particular tritone relationship involved is that

---

[3] Evans, pp. 452-453.

of F sharp - C, the initial notes of each of the two scale segments used in the ostinato.

2.1.8 Metre and tempo

Britten here uses a highly unusual metre for a passacaglia, namely 5/16 or simple quintuple. The tempo indication is "Slow ♪ = 80".

There are no tempo changes during the course of the passacaglia.

2.1.9 Rhythm

An interesting feature of this ostinato theme is that it is built entirely from running scalic passages. A sense of uneasiness is created by the asymmetrical quintuplet groupings, and this restlessness is increased by the fact that there are two rhythmic patterns within the quintuplet groupings, namely  and . These rhythmic patterns alternate measure by measure. Thus, the monotony which could result from an unwavering sixteenth note rhythm is averted by the fluctuating grouping within the two measures of the ostinato.

2.1.10 Melodic tension

The theme is open-ended in that it ends on the submediant, and this creates a forward drive. Furthermore, the chromaticism in the second measure of the ostinato creates melodic tension.

2.1.11 Derivation

The melodic form of the ostinato is not derived from any previously heard material. However, the tritone relationship F sharp to C on which it hinges is a central relationship throughout the *War Requiem*.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement of the ostinato is unaccompanied.

2.2.2 Variations in length

There is a one measure extension of the ostinato theme at the end of both statements ten and sixteen. This same extension is spread over

two measures at the end of statement twenty three. These three extensions coincide with the conclusion of each choral entry with full orchestra at the end of each stanza of the tenor solo.

There is, furthermore, a one measure extension at the end of statement five which coincides with the end of the second line of the tenor solo.

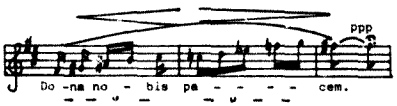
All these extensions continue the upward curve of the second measure of the ostinato, but reverse the interval structure. Thus, the interval structure of each measure of the ostinato is tone, tone, semitone, tone, whereas that of the extension is tone, semitone, tone, tone.

Ex. 3: Ostinato plus one measure extension [4]



The coda is also an extension of the ostinato. The first measure retains the original fundamental pitch but inverts the direction as in the first measure of statements seventeen and eighteen. The second measure continues the rising pattern but reverses the interval structure of the first measure.

Ex. 4: Coda [5]



2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

The tone colour alternates between the strings of the chamber orchestra, and the chorus plus three clarinets (one of which is a

---

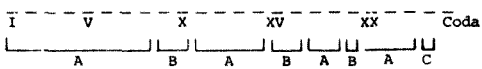
[4] Britten, *War Requiem*, p. 170.

[5] Britten, *War Requiem*, p. 177.

bass clarinet), two bassoons, double bassoon and strings of the full orchestra. Only in the final statement of the ostinato theme do all these resources join forces.

Britten thus relies on contrasting tone colours rather than a continuum of colour to create momentum.

Ex. 5: Tone colour of ostinato
(A = strings of chamber orchestra
B = chorus plus clarinets, bassoons, double bassoon and strings of full orchestra
C = A and B combined)



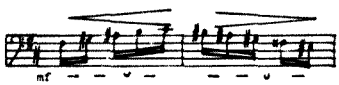
2.2.4 Tempo changes

A constant tempo is maintained throughout this passacaglia.

2.2.5 Other variations of the ostinato theme

During the opening two lines of stanza three of the tenor solo, that is, during statements seventeen and eighteen, the ostinato, while still beginning on the original fundamental pitch, is inverted. Thus, the original interval structure of the ostinato is retained, while the direction of movement is inverted so that the first measure has an ascending contour and the second measure a descending contour.

Ex. 6: Inverted form of ostinato in statements seventeen and eighteen [6]



[6] Britten, *War Requiem*, pp. 174-175.

2.2.6 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

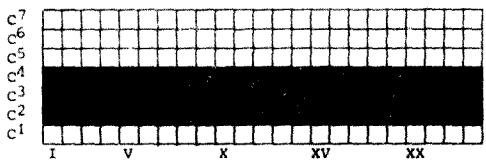
The only point at which the ostinato theme drops out is during the coda. However, the interval structure of the coda itself is based on that of the ostinato (see paragraph 2.2.2, pp. 191-192).

2.2.7 Degree of audibility

The ostinato theme is clearly audible throughout due to the fact that it is only subjected to very slight modification which does not cause it to become unrecognizable.

2.2.8 Octave register

Ex. 7: Octave register of ostinato



The ostinato remains in the same octave register throughout the passacaglia.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are twenty three statements of the two measure ostinato. The overall length of the passacaglia is fifty five measures. The twenty three statements of the ostinato produce forty seven measures and not forty six, due to the prolongation of the final note of the first measure of the ostinato over an additional measure in the final statement. The additional eight measures arise from extensions between statements five and six, ten and eleven, and sixteen and seventeen, and at the end of statement twenty three. There is also a three measure coda.

Thus, the ostinato has a strong influence on the overall length of the passacaglia.

The overall time-span is 3.36 minutes. [7]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

The chromaticism used within this ostinato theme gives it a distinctive quality, and as a result it has a strongly sectional effect.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

A through-composed setting of the Owen poem "At a Calvary near the Ancre" for tenor solo forms the accompaniment to the ostinato. The setting is mainly syllabic and in arioso style.

In the setting of the first stanza, the first and third lines have identical setting, while the fourth line differs only slightly from the second line.

The setting of the second stanza bears no resemblance to that of the first. However, in the third stanza, the setting of the third and fourth lines is identical to that of the first and second lines of stanza one.

The accompaniment is, therefore, dominated by the setting of the opening two lines of the poem with its falling contour. Also prominent in these lines is the tritone F^5 sharp - C^5 - F^4 sharp.

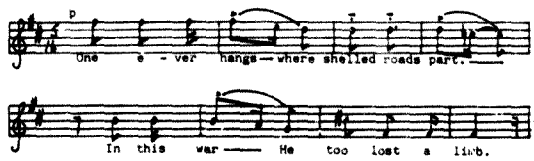
Thus, the tritone pervades not only the ostinato, but also the accompaniment.

One can therefore regard the entire movement as being built from one kernel motive or theme, namely the tritone.

---

[7] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *War Requiem*, with Galina Vishnevskaya, Peter Pears, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, cond. Benjamin Britten, London Symphony Orchestra, Decca SET 252/253, 1963.

Ex. 8: Setting of opening two lines of *poem* [8]



3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

As the octave register of the ostinato is constant throughout the passacaglia, it is the task of the accompaniment to create interest and vitality in the upper range.

While the occasional note of the tenor solo lies above the octave register of the ostinato, for the most part the solo is overlapped by the ostinato. The harmonic support given to the tenor solo by the flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn and harp, however, is interwoven both above and below the ostinato. Thus, the ostinato, despite the fact that its octave register is constant throughout, pervades the entire fabric of the passacaglia.

3.2.2 Tone colour

The predominant tone colour in the accompaniment is that of the tenor solo, with support from the oboe, clarinet and bassoon. More strident colours are evident at the beginning of the third stanza (statement seventeen). However, by the end of the stanza, the support from the oboe, clarinet and bassoon has been reinstated.

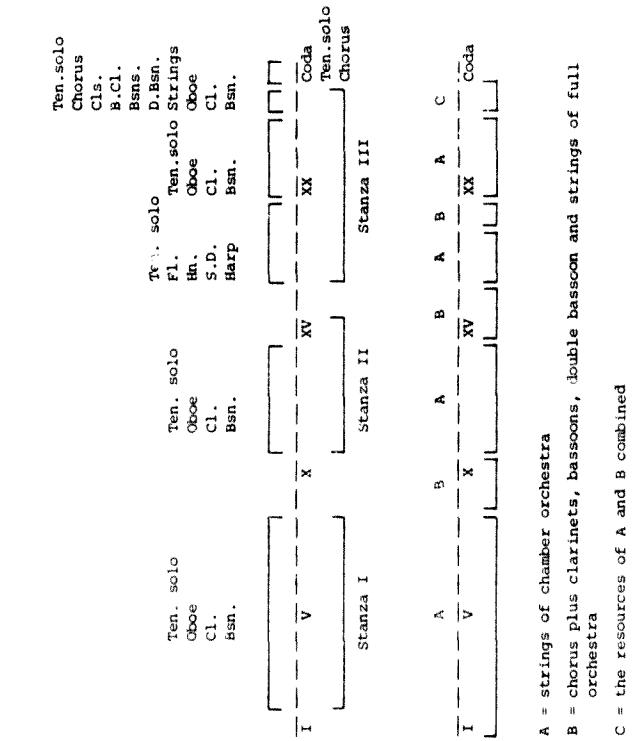
The ostinato is extended melodically between the second and third lines of the first stanza, and this same extension is used climactically at the end of the final line of each choral entry.

The coda is sung by tenor solo against a sustained F sharp major triad in the chorus.

---

[8] Britten, *War Requiem*, p. 170.

Ex. 9: Tone colour of accompaniment and ostinato



3.2.3 Texture

The predominant texture in this passacaglia is that established at the outset of the tenor solo. This texture is retained throughout the first and second stanzas as well as during the second half of the third stanza. A contrasting texture is heard in the choral refrain at the end of each stanza of the tenor solo. A further contrasting texture with very marked, incisive rhythms occurs at the opening of the third stanza.

Thus, Britten has here used the device of contrasting textures rather than creating a continuum of texture.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

The accompaniment tends to minimize the sectional effect of the ostinato in that the setting of the lines of the tenor solo for the most part overlap the repetitions of the ostinato. Only the beginning of the first and third lines of the first stanza and the third and fourth lines of the third stanza coincide with the beginning of a repetition of the ostinato.

Moreover, even in the choral refrain, based on the melodic pattern of the ostinato, which punctuates the stanzas, the words overlap the statements of the ostinato, thus minimizing the sectional effect.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The ostinato and accompaniment in this passacaglia have a fairly equal relationship throughout. The accompanying tenor solo is punctuated by the choral refrain based on the ostinato itself. Thus the ostinato carries considerable melodic importance.

3.3.3 Grouping

The use of a choral refrain based on the ostinato not only to separate each stanza of the tenor solo from the next, but also to punctuate stanza three, creates a rondo-like effect, in which the setting of each stanza of the text provides an episode. In addition to the unifying effect of this ostinato theme as a recurring refrain, there is also a unifying theme within the episodes themselves.

In stanza one, the setting of the third and fourth lines is identical to that of the first and second lines apart from a slight deviation in the final measure.

This same theme recurs as the setting for the final two lines of the third stanza. The recurrence of this theme at the end of the poem has a unifying effect by creating a sense of return.

4. MOTION FACTORS

4.1 THE PARAMETERS

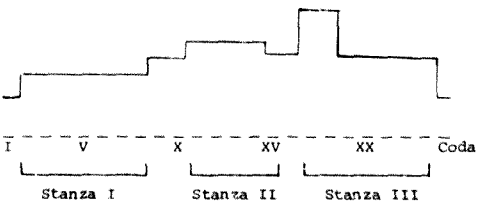
4.1.1 Density

The changes in density occur in stages. There is a slight increase in density in the second stanza of the tenor solo as compared to the first stanza, resulting from the greater activity of the oboe, clarinet and bassoon of the chamber orchestra.

The opening two lines of stanza three see a marked increase in density, while there is a slackening off again in the following two lines, as well as the choral refrain and tenor solo coda which follow.

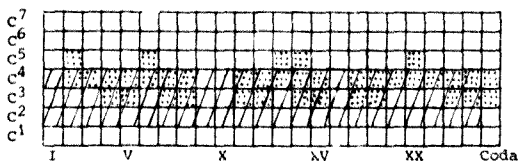
The density, therefore, creates an arch profile, reaching a peak in the opening two lines of stanza three (statements seventeen and eighteen of the ostinato). Thereafter, there is a gradual tapering off of the density until the end of the movement.

Ex. 10: Density profile



4.1.2 Range

Ex. 11: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁝ = accompaniment)



The contrasts of range are not very wide due to the limitations of the tenor voice which forms the foreground accompaniment.

The highpoint for the tenor solo is F^4 sharp with which the solo both begins and ends. In the first stanza both the first and third lines begin from this highpoint and then descend to F^3 sharp an octave lower.

The range of the tenor solo in the second stanza presents an arch contour, rising up to F^4 sharp and then falling again to end on F^3 sharp an octave lower.

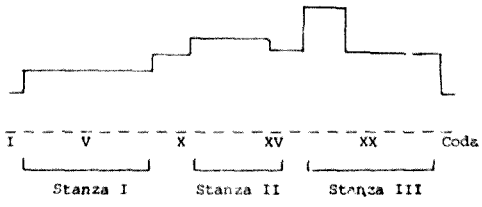
In the third stanza, the range again has an arch profile rising to the F^4 sharp and then ending again on the F^3 sharp an octave lower.

4.1.3 Dynamics

As is the case with the density, the dynamic changes occur in stages, reaching a peak in the first two lines of stanza three, and thereafter falling off during the closing stages of the passacaglia. The dynamics, therefore, create an arch profile.

Within these dynamic stages, however, vitality is created by the use of dynamic waves within each of the extensions of the ostinato which occur at the end of each stanza of the solo as well as at the midpoint of stanza one. A dynamic wave also enlivens the coda which has also been shown to be an extension of the ostinato (see paragraph 2.2.2, pp. 191-192).

Ex. 12: Dynamic profile



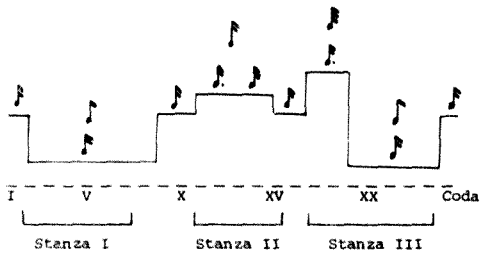
4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes occur in stages. There is a gradual increase in rhythmic activity during the first two and a half stanzas of the tenor solo. This gradually rising contour is interrupted by the

choral refrain in statements nine to ten and fifteen to sixteen. Following the peak of rhythmic activity in the first two lines of stanza three (statements seventeen and eighteen), there is a marked drop in activity for the remainder of the stanza, and a slight increase in activity in the coda.

Thus, the rhythmic contour is that of an arch with double interruption on the upward curve.

Ex. 13: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

The parameters of density, dynamics and rhythm all support an arch profile reaching a peak in the first two lines of stanza three (statements seventeen and eighteen) and thereafter tapering off.

On the downward curve, the rhythm shows a slight deviation in that there is a slight increase in activity while the parameters of density and dynamics are at a lowpoint.

The peak of the arch is also supported by the range of the tenor solo which reaches its highest point during the second line of the third stanza.

The wide contrasts of range in the coda are a means of creating changing colour contrasts.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

The arch shape of the passacaglia results in the parameters of density, dynamics and rhythm ending at a lowpoint. This creates a feeling of

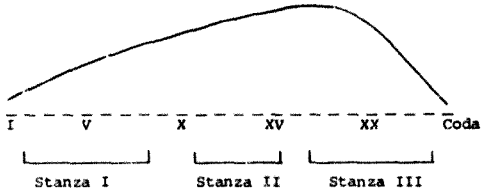
conclusion and repose, so that the passacaglia movement is complete in itself, and does not depend on anything that follows for a sense of completion.

A sense of finality is also achieved by the return at the end of stanza three of the musical setting of stanza one. This return in the material of the accompaniment gives a feeling of recapitulation and completeness.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal profile of this passacaglia is that of an arch, reaching a peak in the first two lines of the third stanza of the accompanying text.

Ex. 14: Formal profile



5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia forms part of a multi-movement work, and represents the emotional and musical climax of the work as a whole.

In the *War Requiem*, Britten has given expression to a moral tension by means of a musical tension, and thus the tritone underlines the instability of society and the incompatibility of war with true Christianity.

The tritone not only colours many of the harmonies and melodic contours, but it also maintains the tonal instability which is so characteristic of the work.

The "Agnus Dei" is the only movement which is consistently controlled by a tritonal relationship.

> In its marvellous embodiment of an emotional crux in a tonal structure the Agnue Dei marks the musical high point of the *Requiem*; ... the tritone here operates at the most comprehensive level and for a moment we can rise to a serene acceptance of what elsewhere had seemed the very token of dissension.[9]

---

[9] Evans, p. 462.

CHAPTER 13

SYMPHONY FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 68, 1963

1. BACKGROUND

The *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* was written for the Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, whom Britten met for the first time in 1960. Britten began composing it in the spring of 1963, and it was completed in May 1963. It was given its first performance in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory on 12 March 1964 by Mstislav Rostropovich with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Benjamin Britten.

> Having conceived a first movement in which sonata principles are cardinal, he decided that concerto virtuosity would be a tiresome irrelevance. There is no conflict genuine or spurious, between soloist and orchestra, and no place for the importunate rhetoric passage-work. On the other hand, this is not a symphony for orchestra 'with cello' after the model of *Harold in Italy* or d'Indy's *Symphonie cévenole*; rather it is a sonata in which a cello is partnered by an orchestra. [1]

This symphony is in four movements

- I Allegro maestoso
- II Presto inquieto (Scherzo)
- III Adagio with cello cadenza leading to the finale
- IV Andante allegro (Passacaglia).

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 Sequence

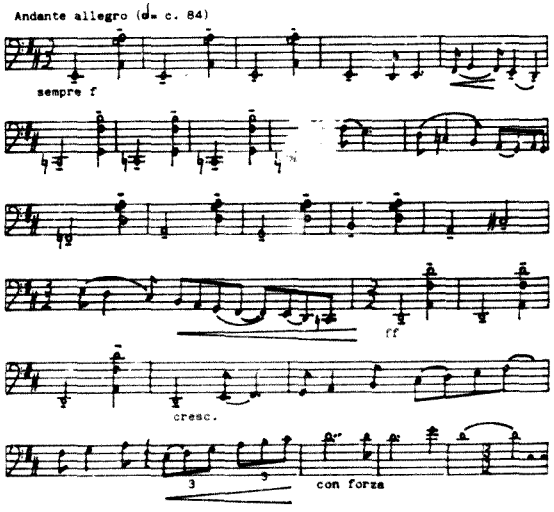
This twenty six measure ostinato theme consists of five phrases. While sequence in the generally accepted sense of the term is not in

---

[1] Evans, p. 314.

evidence, nevertheless there is a strong similarity in the structure of the first four phrases. Each of these phrases begins with a repeated open chord followed by a syncopated stepwise passage. Phrase five does not conform to the pattern of the previous four phrases, its material being derived from the third movement of this symphony.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [2]



2.1.2 Characteristic intervals

Stepwise movement in tones and semitones predominates in the scalic passages, in contrast with the larger intervals of major and minor thirds and perfect fourths and fifths between the bass notes in the chordal passages.

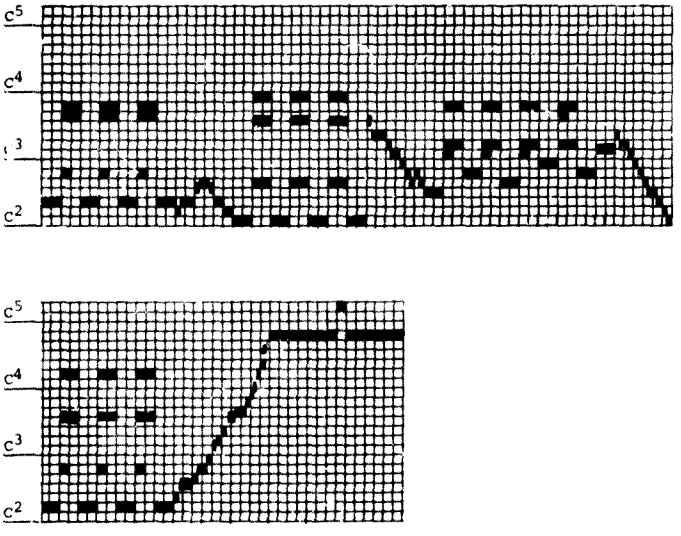
---

[2] B. Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 68, pocket score, (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1963), pp. 68-69.

2.1.3 Contour

The graph below (Ex. 2) illustrates the contour of this ostinato theme. Initially, the overall activity direction follows a gradual downward pattern until the last quarter note of measure sixteen where the lowest point of the decline is reached. This is followed by a rapid rise in measures twenty to twenty three, coming to rest on A^4 in measure twenty three before a further brief excursion to D^5 on the fourth quarter note of measure twenty four, and a return to rest on A^4 in measures twenty five and twenty six.

Ex. 2: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The contour, therefore, is that of an inverse arch, dipping down to reach its lowpoint in measure sixteen, that is, slightly after the midpoint of the theme which occurs in measure thirteen.

This theme appears to be constructed on three levels. The repeated chords at the beginning of phrases one, two and four, involve

all three levels of construction, while those which open phrase three involve only the two upper levels. The melodic running passages, on the other hand are confined to the lowest level in phrase one, move up to the intermediate level in phrase two, back through the intermediate level and into the lowest level in phrase three, and finally soar through all three levels in phrase four to form the upward curve of the inverse arch.

2.1.4 Chordal influence

Chordal influence is evident in the interludes which separate the running scalic passages. Measures six to eight reiterate a seventh chord on G with the fifth omitted. In measures eleven to fourteen a triad on D with third omitted is outlined, while in measures seventeen to nineteen the complete major triad on D is reiterated.

2.1.5 Length

The twenty six measures of this ostinato theme are far in excess of the Baroque preference of four or eight measures. The ostinato is repeated six times.

There is an extremely wide interval, namely two octaves and a perfect fourth, between the first and last notes of the ostinato. The ostinato begins on the supertonic and ends on the dominant.

The total range-span is also extremely wide, being three octaves and a major second.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

Several tonal centres are implied in this five phrase theme, but the predominant centre is that of D major. This is the tonal centre of the first, fourth and fifth phrases. The second phrase centres on B phrygian. while the third phrase moves from the B phrygian of the second phrase back to the original tonality of D major.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

Simple duple metre (2/2) predominates in this ostinato theme. Measure sixteen sees a change to simple triple metre, but this is short-lived, and the simple duple metre is re-instated in the following measure.

In the fifth presentation of the ostinato theme, the metre, while remaining duple, changes from two half notes per measure to two quarter notes per measure. As a result, the reiterated chords at the beginning of each phrase now appear in quarter note succession in place of the previous half note succession, while in the running passages, a new rhythm, entirely unrelated to the previous rhythm of the running passages, appears.

The sixth statement of the ostinato theme sees a return to the original rhythm as found in statements one to four.

The tempo indication of this passacaglia is "Andante allegro" with the metronome indication of ♩ = c. 84.

The only respite from this tempo comes during the fantasy-like interlude which precedes the sixth and final presentation of the ostinato theme, in which the cello and woodwind alternate.

2.1.8 *Rhythm*

Interesting rhythmic features in this theme are the use of syncopation as well as the use of running scalic passages which give the theme considerable vigour.

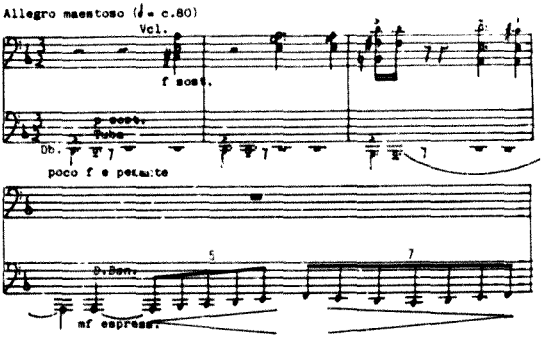
2.1.9 Melodic tension

The use of more than one tonal level within the five phrases creates a melodic tension. The ostinato theme ends on the dominant of D major, and this is a further forward-propelling device. The fact that this dominant does not find resolution to the tonic until the fourth phrase of the theme results in the build-up of considerable melodic tension.

2.1.10 Derivation

The scalic passages of the ostinato theme appear to find their model in the scalic passages at the opening of the first movement.

Ex. 3: First movement, mm. 1-4 [3]



The final phrase of the ostinato theme is derived from the final phrase of the main theme of the Adagio movement (measures 44-47), with time values doubled.

Ex. 4: Final phrase of main theme of Adagio [4]



Ex. 5: Final phrase of ostinato theme [5]



---

[3] Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, p. 1.

[4] Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, p. 72.

[5] Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, pp. 88-89.

2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement of this ostinato theme is accompanied. It is presented on the cello, while the subsidiary theme of the Adagio movement is heard above it on the trumpet. This subsidiary theme forms the basis of six subsequent variations above the ostinato. The setting of the initial statement is, however, fairly meagre, thus allowing for a pattern of growth by the use of increasing intensity during the subsequent statements of the ostinato.

2.2.2 Variations in length

In the subsequent statements of the ostinato theme, there are considerable variations in its length.

Statement three has twenty nine measures. One measure of repeated chords is omitted at the beginning of the first phrase. An additional two measures of repeated chords are inserted at the beginning of the second phrase, one measure of repeated chords is inserted at the beginning of phrase four, while melodic elaboration leads to an additional measure in phrase five.

Statement four has only twenty four measures. In phrase one a measure of repeated chords is omitted. Measures thirteen and fourteen of the original theme are condensed into one measure in the second phrase. The overall number of measures remains undisturbed in phrase three, despite considerable rhythmic changes.

Statement five has twenty measures. Phrases four and five are omitted completely. Phrase three is also incomplete, lacking its final six eighth notes. Further changes in this statement include the insertion of an additional three measures of repeated chords in the second phrase, followed by the extension of two measures over three measures.

The final statement (statement six) is extended to thirty three measures. This extension results from the insertion of additional repeated chords at the beginning of each of the first four phrases: two measures at the beginning of phrases one, two and four, and one measure at the beginning of phrase three.

Although the number of measures in statement two corresponds to that of the initial statement of the ostinato theme, it is not an exact repetition of the theme. One measure of repeated chords is omitted from phrase one, while measure twenty three of the original theme is omitted. The resulting overall number of measures is twenty six.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

The tone colour changes for each presentation of the ostinato. This creates vitality as well as an overall gradual crescendo with an interruption in sections five and six.

Ex. 6: Tone colour of ostinato

Sections:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Vcl.	Cls.	Strings	Vcl.	Strings		Vlas.
		Bsn.	Tpts.	Bsn.			Vcls.
		D.Bsn.	Tbn.	D.Bsn.			Dbs.
		H.s.	Tuba				Hn.
		Tuba					Timp.

2.2.4 Tempo changes

Section five marks the beginning of the interruption of the gradual rise profile. At this significant point of the formal contour, there is a change of metre from the original 2/2 to 2/4, however, the basic tempo remains unchanged. The repeated chords at the beginning of phrases one to four of the ostinato now occur at twice the original speed. While there are substantial changes in the rhythm of the scalic passages, they do not necessarily appear at twice their original speed.

The end of section five sees the introduction of a fantasy style with alternation between strict and free elements.

2.2.5 Variations in rhythm

Following the initial presentation of the ostinato theme all subsequent statements have rhythmic deviations. In statements two and three,

these modifications are only slight, but they become more and more extensive as the passa aglia progresses.

2.2.6 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

The first four statements of the ostinato theme are regular. The fifth statement is incomplete, only the first three phrases being presented. The final three beats of the third phrase are also omitted. Thereafter, the ostinato theme is abandoned for sixty four measures.

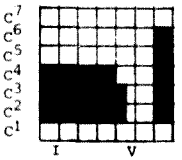
This drop-out of the ostinato theme is associated with a drop in intensity just prior to the climactic finale.

2.2.7 Degree of audibility

While there are slight variations in several presentations of the ostinato theme, these are never so great that the main outlines of the ostinato become unrecognizable. It is therefore audible throughout.

2.2.8 Octave register

Ex. 7: Octave register of ostinato



The above illustration shows that the ostinato occupies a low register throughout, apart from one excursion into the middle range in the final statement.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are six statements of the ostinato theme. The overall length of

the passacaglia is 238 measures. The overall time-span is exactly seven minutes. [6]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

This ostinato theme creates a fairly high degree of sectionalization. This results from the phrase structure in which each of the first four phrases begins with repeated chords, and ends with running stepwise passages. In contrast to these four phrases, phrase five is highly melodic, coming at the climax of the theme. This structure results in sectionalization not only between successive statements of the theme, but also from phrase to phrase within the ostinato theme itself.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

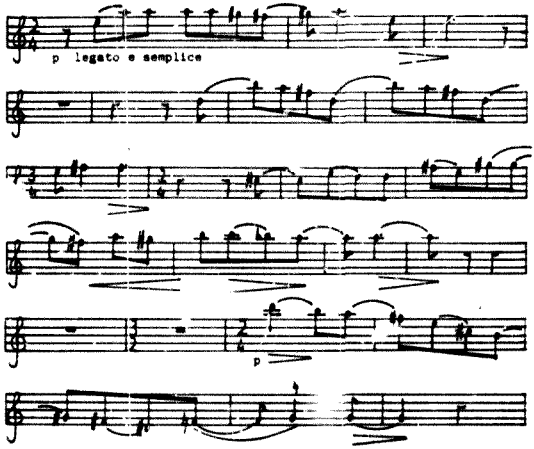
3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

The accompanying material consists of a single four phrase theme which is derived directly from the subsidiary theme of the Adagio third movement.

---

[6] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, with soloist Mstislav Rostropovich, cond. Benjamin Britten, English Chamber Orchestra, Decca SXL 6641, 1964.

Ex. 8: Subsidiary theme of Adagio movement (score number 53) [7]

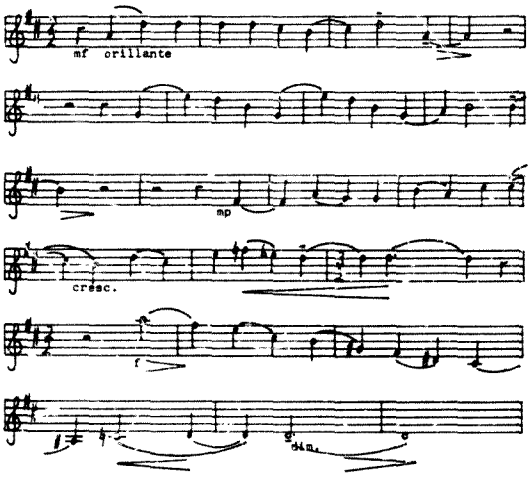


In the passacaglia movement, the subsidiary theme of the Adagio is given out by th trumpet. The first three phrases are a fifth lower, and the fourth phrase a fourth lower than the original presentation of this theme in the Adagio.

---

[7] Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, pp. 74-75.

Ex. 9: Accompanying theme of passacaglia (score number 63) [8]



The above theme has four phrases, which correspond to the first four phrases of the ostinato.

During the variations on this theme, it is transposed to different pitch levels, and is presented in notes of decreasing value from quarter notes through to sixteenth notes. In section six, this process is reversed, and the successive musings of the cello are presented in increasing note values from eighth note triplets to eighth note pairs, to quarter note triplets, to quarter notes. This gradual increase in rhythmic values serves as a preparation for the seventh variation in half notes.

In the first variation, the theme is presented in 6/4 metre, in place of the original 2/2 metre, on the first and second violins in canon at the fourth. The phrases are extended by the interpolation

---

[8] Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, p. 88.

of transposed segments. This practice is also retained in subsequent variations.

The metre reverts to 2/2 in the second variation in which the theme is transposed up a third on the cello, which, at the same time double stops another part which moves in contrary motion to the theme.

The third variation changes to 12/8 metre to present each phrase of the theme on the woodwind in five-part imitation.

In the fourth variation, the tune is presented by the cello at the fifth, in a sprightly rendering of the theme in 2/4 metre. After the third phrase, however, the ostinato and the melodic model of the accompanying theme itself are abandoned and a free development of the texture takes place.

The fourth variation leads into the free fantasy-like rendition of variation five, in which the cello reflects "senza misura" on each phrase of the theme punctuated by the final phrase of the ostinato theme, melodically elaborated, by the clarinet, horn and bassoon successively.

In the sixth variation, the woodwind, brass and violins take up the accompanying theme, however, the length of the phrases in each of these variations does not necessarily conform to the phrase lengths of the theme.

Thus, the accompanying theme undergoes variations by varied rhythms, contrasting instrumental colours and changing textures. Apart from variation six, all the variations have a contrapuntal texture. Variation six is chordal and predominantly homorhythmic.

Each variation encompasses the first four phrases of the ostinato, while the fifth phrase of the ostinato functions as a tailpiece both to the ostinato and to each of the variations above it. The beginning of each new statement of the ostinato also marks the beginning of each new variation above it.

Rhythmically the ostinato is slightly more active than the theme for variations above it. While the rhythm of the repeated chords of the ostinato is static, it gains momentum in the lively, syncopated rhythms of the scalic passages. The predominant rhythmic movement of the theme for variation is in quarter notes, although here again, it is rhythmically enlivened by the use of syncopation.

The range of the accompanying theme is a perfect twelfth which is narrow in comparison with the three octaves plus a major second range of the ostinato.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

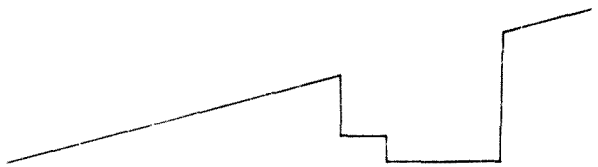
The accompaniment remains above the ostinato throughout apart from the final, fifth phrase of the ostinato, which always rises above the accompaniment. This obviously excludes section five in which only the first three phrases of the ostinato are heard, and section six in which the ostinato is absent.

3.2.2 Tone colour

The tone colour changes in each variation of the accompanying theme, and supports the overall formal profile, in addition to functioning as a means of creating vitality. Britten here uses an additive crescendo reaching a peak in the final variation.

Ex. 10: Tone colour of accompaniment and ostinato

						Fls.
					Vcl.	Oboes
					punctu-	Cls.
			Picc.		ated	Bsns.
			Fl.		by	Hn.
			Oboe		Cl.	Trs.
			Cl.		Hn.	Tbn.
Tpt.	Vlns.	Vcl.	Bsn.	Vcl.	Bsn.	Vlns.
Theme	Var. I	Var. II	Var. III	Var. IV	Var. V	Var. VI



Vcl.	Cls.	Strings	Vcl.	Strings	Vlas.
	Bsn.		Trs	Bsn.	Vcls.
	D.Bsn.		Tbn.	D.Bsn.	Dbs.
	Hns.		Tuba		Hn.
	Tuba				Timp.

3.2.3 Texture

Throughout the passacaglia there are marked changes of texture at the beginning of each new variation on the accompanying theme. Thus attention is focussed on the sectional character of the passacaglia, as each new variation on the accompanying theme coincides with the beginning of a repetition of the ostinato.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

In this passacaglia there is no attempt in the accompaniment to disguise the constant recurrence of the ostinato. The accompaniment, in fact, draws attention to each new repetition of the ostinato by the fact that

the beginning of each variation on the accompanying theme coincides with the beginning of a restatement of the ostinato. This gives rise to maximum sectionalization.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

Neither the accompaniment nor the ostinato can be regarded as being dominant in this passacaglia. Their relationship is fairly equal. The accompaniment exhibits a fairly consistent level of melodic importance against the ostinato throughout, the only exception being the free fantasy-like variation in section six where the ostinato is absent.

3.3.3 Grouping

The use of only one theme (and variations upon it) in the accompaniment, creates a feeling of continuity, although it does not distract from the sectional effect of the repetitions of the ostinato due to the coincidence of each variation with a repetition of the ostinato. However, after phrase three in section five, and also for the entire duration of the fantasy-like section six, the accompaniment breaks free from the shackles of the ostinato, and consequently, at this lowpoint of the profile, a feeling of progress begins to be generated in anticipation of the climax in the following statement.

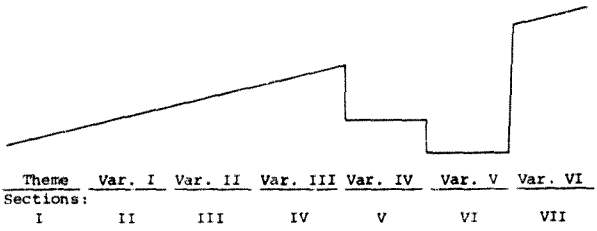
4. *MOTION FACTORS*

4.1 THE PARAMETERS

4.1.1 Density

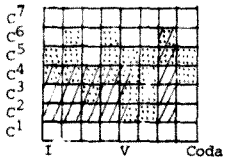
There is a progressive increase in density through sections two to four (that is, statements two to four of the ostinato). Section five, however (statement five of the ostinato), sees a marked drop in density, and there is a still further drop in section six (the fantasy-like variation). The changes in density occur in stages which correspond with the ostinato repetitions, or the variations on the accompanying theme in those instances where the ostinato is absent. This progressive growth of density during the first four sections, and the subsequent falling off during sections five and six, creates a density profile of gradual rise with interruption.

Ex. 11· Density profile



4.1.2 Range (/// = ostinato; ⁚⁚ = accompaniment)

Ex. 12: Range



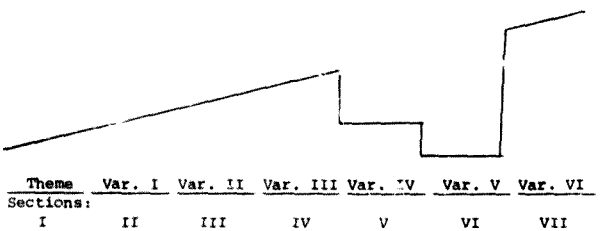
The above diagrammatic representation of the range according to octave register shows that sudden narrowing and widening and shifting of the area of range concentration in the accompaniment is used as a means of creating vitality and motion.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The dynamic changes are made in stages which correspond to the repetitions of the ostinato and the variations above it. During the first four sections there is a gradual increase in the dynamic level, followed by a marked drop in section five and a further drop in section six, before the rise to the climax and the ensuing coda in section seven. The dynamics, therefore, present a profile of gradual rise with interruption.

As the ostinato is of considerable length (twenty six measures) the dynamic stages, corresponding as they do with the repetitions of the ostinato, are also very long. Interest and vitality are retained during these extremely long stages, however, by the use of dynamic waves in the accompanying material which generate motion.

Ex. 13: Dynamic profile

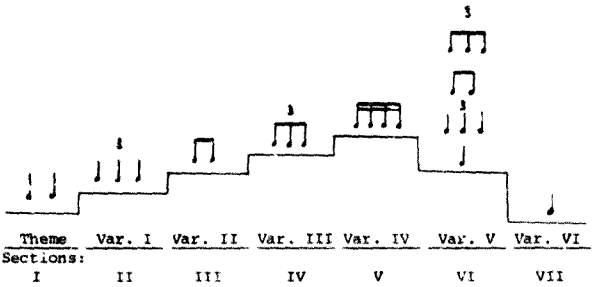


4.1.4 Rhythm

The rhythmic changes also occur in stages which correspond to the repetitions of the ostinato. Rhythmically there is an arch profile reaching its peak in section five, that is, just after the midpoint of the passacaglia, and immediately prior to the overall climax of the movement.

There is an increase in rhythmic activity from the beginning of the passacaglia through to the end of section five. The process is then reversed during the cello's successive reflections in section six, each of which occurs in a slightly longer rhythmic value. This process of growth in the rhythmic values culminates in section seven in which the accompanying theme is presented in half notes, that is in augmentation, the longest rhythmic value used in the variations.

Ex. 14: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

Both the density and dynamics present a profile of gradual rise with interruption at sections five and six. The upward curve of the rhythmic arch profile corresponds with the gradual rise profile, but continues through the interruption of the rise to reach its peak in section five when both the density and dynamics are down. The rhythm, therefore, generates the motion during the period that the other parameters are temporarily at a lowpoint. Only in section six does the rhythm gradually begin to relax. Subsequently, in section seven, the rhythm reaches its lowest point, while the density and dynamics reach their peak.

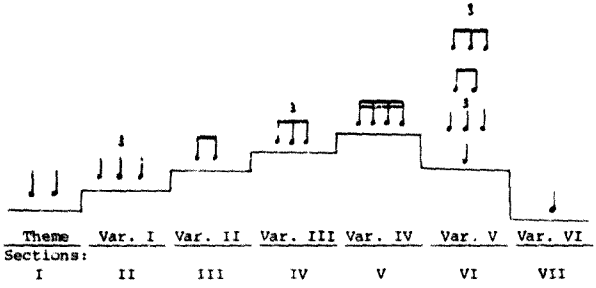
The range, with its sudden widenings and narrowings and shifts of concentration, shows a concentration in a lower range during the interruption of the rise, and a shift to a higher range during the peak of the rise in section seven.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

This passacaglia profile ends on a highpoint while, in contradiction to this, the rhythm is at a lowpoint. This slowing down of the rhythmic activity has a broadening effect.

Britten augments the note values of the accompanying theme to half notes during the final statement of the ostinato and the subsequent short coda. The seventeen measure coda is not even the equivalent in duration of a single statement of the ostinato (twenty

Ex. 14: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

Both the density and dynamics present a profile of gradual rise with interruption at sections five and six. The upward curve of the rhythmic arch profile corresponds with the gradual rise profile, but continues through the interruption of the rise to reach its peak in section five when both the density and dynamics are down. The rhythm, therefore, generates the motion during the period that the other parameters are temporarily at a lowpoint. Only in section six does the rhythm gradually begin to relax. Subsequently, in section seven, the rhythm reaches its lowest point, while the density and dynamics reach their peak.

The range, with its sudden widenings and narrowings and shifts of concentration, shows a concentration in a lower range during the interruption of the rise, and a shift to a higher range during the peak of the rise in section seven.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

This passacaglia profile ends on a highpoint while, in contradiction to this, the rhythm is at a lowpoint. This slowing down of the rhythmic activity has a broadening effect.

Britten augments the note values of the accompanying theme to half notes during the final statement of the ostinato and the subsequent short coda. The seventeen measure coda is not even the equivalent in duration of a single statement of the ostinato (twenty

six measures). This rhythmic broadening gives a feeling of finality to the movement, while the passacaglia itself, with its stabilizing quality, gives a sense of finality to the work as a whole.

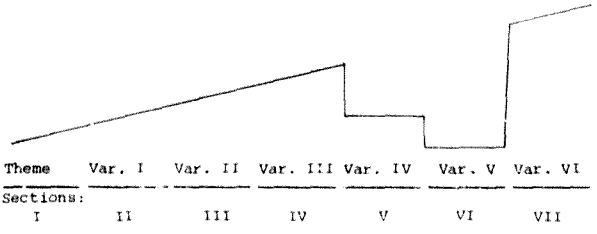
The coda is based on the perfect fourths of the final phrase of the ostinato.

5. FORMAL PLAN

This passacaglia presents the profile of a gradual rise with interruption. The interruption takes place in sections five and six, that is, shortly after the midway point of the passacaglia, after considerable momentum has already been established. The interruption coincides with a complete drop out of the ostinato theme in section six, and an incomplete statement in section five in which the register of the ostinato is confined to two octaves in contrast to the previous three octaves.

While the other parameters are at a lowpoint during the interruption, the rhythm reaches its maximum activity in section five with a gradual tapering off in section six.

Ex. 15: Formal profile



5.1 LARGER FORM

This passacaglia is the final movement of a multimovement work. It provides an opportunity for the use of confirming elements. The basic idea of the ostinato itself, that is, the alternation of a succession of chords with a scalic passage, is derived from the opening measures

of the first movement. The final phrase of the ostinato is derived from the final phrase of the main theme of the Adagio (third movement). The accompanying theme is based on the subsidiary theme of the Adagio. This strong emphasis in the passacaglia on elements *from* the Adagio movement emphasizes the inextricable link between these two movements. Concerning the cadenza linking the two movements, Peter Evans states:

> ... the cadenza is concerned ... to establish the link that makes an entity of the last two movements; it may be viewed as a second development in a design which places the restatement of the slow movement's subsidiary theme at the head of the finale.[9]

The passacaglia has an excellent capacity for establishing a tonal centre. The tonal centre D of this final movement represents a return to the tonal area of the opening where the tonal centre was d. The tonal centres of the four movements are as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

d g E <u>D</u>.

The ability of the passacaglia to confirm a tonal centre and to forge links with previously-used thematic material both in the ostinato itself and the accompaniment, while at the same time creating a feeling of regularity through the constant repetition of the ostinato, make this passacaglia a most effective final movement.

---

[9] Evans, p. 321.

CHAPTER 14

STRING QUARTET NO. 3, OP. 94, 1975

1. BACKGROUND

The third String Quartet was Britten's last instrumental work, and was dedicated to Hans Keller. It was written during October and November 1975, and was first performed on 19 December 1976, fifteen days after the composer's death, by the Amadeus Quartet at the Maltings.

The work is in five movements:

- I Duets With moderate movement (♩. = c. 65)
- II Ostinato Very fast (♩ = c. 132)
- III Solo Very calm (♩ = c. 40)
- IV Burlesque Fast, con fuoco (♩ = c. 192)
- V Recitative and Passacaglia (La Serenissima) Slowly moving (♩ = c. 50).

> In the serene unfolding of Britten's last ground bass movement we shall surely hear, as in the passacaglias of *Lucretia* and *Herring*, a threnody, but now it is as much for the composer himself as for his hero. [1]

The hero to whom Evans here refers is Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*, Op. 88, 1973.

2. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.1 STRUCTURE

2.1.1 Sequence

This is a two phrased ostinato theme. The movement is exclusively by whole tones throughout. The ostinato theme relies heavily not on pitch sequence, but on pitch repetition. The first phrase consists

---

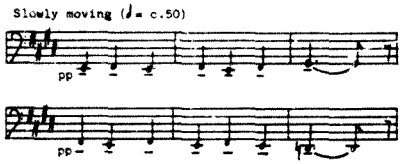
[1] Evans, p. 347.

of the whole tone interval E^2-F^2 sharp which is twice repeated before moving up another whole tone to G^2 sharp.

The second phrase is an exact inversion of the first phrase, and therefore relies equally on repetition.

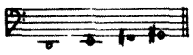
There is a strong reliance on rhythmic sequence between the two phrases. The second phrase is an exact rhythmic sequence of the first phrase.

Ex. 1: Ostinato theme [2]



This concentration on a single type of interval (the whole tone), plus the fact that the second phrase is an exact inversion of the first while at the same time being a rhythmic sequence of the first, makes for a highly unified structure.

2.1.2 *Characteristic intervals*

The intervallic movement in this ostinato theme is confined exclusively to whole tones. The entire theme is built from the following four notes  the outer limits of which span a tritone.

2.1.3 Tritone influence

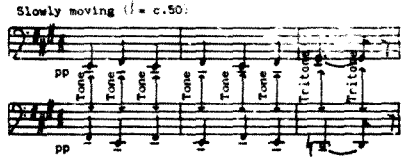
The interval of a tritone exists between the final notes of the first and second phrases. In addition to the ver, strategic placement of this tritone, it is given further significance by the fact that it is

---

[2] B. Britten, String Quartet no. 3, Op. 94, pocket score (London: Faber, 1977), p. 31.

the only interval larger than a whole tone which occurs between any note in the second phrase and its corresponding note in the first phrase. The notes forming the tritone are rhythmically emphasized by being the only notes of the ostinato which have a duration longer than a quarter note.

Ex. 2: Correspondence between phrases of ostinato theme[3]



2.1.4 Contour

Ex. 3: Contour of ostinato (one horizontal square equals one quarter note; one vertical square equals one pitch class)



The ostinato theme consists of an arch contour with an early peak slightly before the midpoint and which falls to a slightly lower pitch level than that from which it began.

The range of the ostinato theme is a tritone, and is thus extremely narrow.

The connecting interval between repetitions of the ostinato is a semitone, namely, leading note to tonic.

2.1.5 Length

The six measure ostinato theme consists of two phrases each three

---

[3] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, p. 31.

measures long. The ostinato is stated thirteen times.

2.1.6 Tonal centre

The tonal centre of the ostinato theme is E. The lowered seventh gives a mixolydian flavour.

2.1.7 Metre and tempo

Britten here uses the traditional simple triple metre (3/4), and slow tempo (♩ = c. 50). There is no change of metre in the presentations of the ostinato theme in the course of this movement. Furthermore, the same tempo is retained throughout the movement.

2.1.8 Rhythm

The rhythmic activity of this ostinato theme is fairly subdued and movement is predominantly by quarter notes. The rhythm of the second phrase is identical to that of the first phrase. An interesting feature is the stepwise movement throughout the theme.

2.1.9 Melodic tension

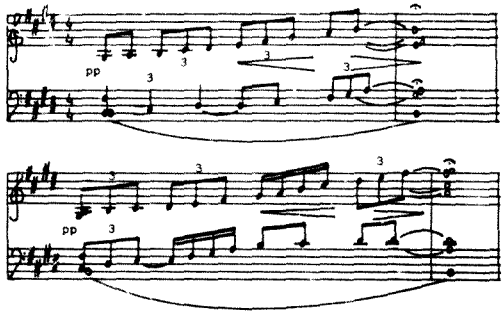
The use of the lowered leading note to end this passacaglia theme results in an open-ended theme which has a very strong forward drive.

2.1.10 Derivation

The fact that Britten has sub-titled this movement "La Serenissima" indicates a possible link between this movement and the city of Venice where it was written, and even more specifically, with Britten's opera *Death in Venice*, Op. 88, 1973.

The passacaglia is centred on E major which is the key associated with Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*. Furthermore, the scalic nature of the ostinato theme shows strong ties with the overlapping string scales used in the opera to symbolize Aschenbach's indefinable longings.

Ex. 4: *Death in Venice*, Op. 88, I,i, score number 20 [4]



The shape of the ostinato theme is, furthermore, foreshadowed in the opening measures of the first movement of the quartet, where there is a winding up in measures one and two and a winding down in measures two and three.

Ex. 5: String Quartet no. 3, I, m. 1-3 [5]



2.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.2.1 First statement setting

The first statement is presented in an accompanied form. The accompaniment of this statement consists of a new counterpoint on the first violin which is punctuated by interjections on the second violin and

---

[4] B. Britten, *Death in Venice*, Op. 88, study score (London: Faber, 1979), p. 19.

[5] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, p. 1.

viola. This counterpoint occurs above the pitch level of the ostinato.

2.2.2 Variations in length

There are no major deviations in the length of the ostinato theme during the course of the passacaglia. Several slight deviations do, however, occur. In three of the thirteen statements, the final note is lengthened, and in one of these statements, the final note of the first phrase is also lengthened.

The greatest deviations occur in statements seven, eleven and thirteen. In statement seven, the second phrase is extended from three to four measures of which only the fourth measure conforms to the original ostinato. In statement eleven, the first and second measures of the second phrase are repeated, thus creating a five measure phrase in place of the original three measure phrase. In statement thirteen, the final presentation of the ostinato theme, only the first phrase is heard in its original form. Thereafter, the first phrase is fragmented, and the second phrase is slightly varied.

The two greatest deviations in the length of the ostinato theme, that is, in statements eleven and thirteen, therefore, occur at structurally important points in the movement. Statement eleven concludes the second main section and ushers in a return of the material of section one, while statement thirteen is the final statement of the ostinato.

2.2.3 Variations in tone colour

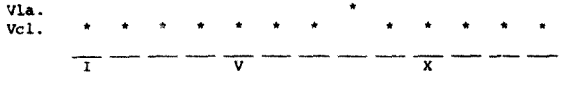
With the exception of statement eight, all thirteen statements of the ostinato theme are presented by the cello, with unvaried articulation, and with only one change in octave register, that is, in statement nine.

Statement eight presents the ostinato theme on the viola in a register two octaves higher than that in which it has hitherto been presented by the double bass.

This statement marks the conclusion of the first main section of the movement.

This passacaglia, therefore, relies heavily on the accompaniment to provide interest and variety in tone colour.

Ex. 6: Tone colour of ostinato



2.2.4 Tempo changes

A relatively constant tempo is maintained throughout this passacaglia.

2.2.5 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

There are only two very slight drop-outs of the ostinato theme. The first drop-out occurs for two measures at the end of statement seven, and the second drop-out occurs for three measures at the end of statement eight. The drop-out at the end of statement eight coincides with the end of the first main section of the movement. Both these minor drop-outs occur during the latter half of the movement.

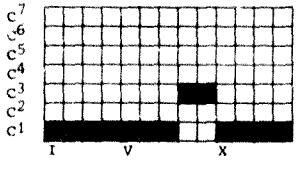
Fragmentation of the theme occurs as part of a process of broadening in the final statement of the ostinato.

2.2.6 Degree of audibility

At no point in this passacaglia is the ostinato subjected to radical modifications or deviations. It therefore remains recognizable throughout.

2.2.7 Octave register

Ex. 7: Octave register of ostinato



The above diagrammatic representation of the octave register of the ostinato shows that it is confined to the bass register throughout. The rise in octave register at the beginning of statement eight, marks the conclusion of the second main section of the movement, while the drop in register at the beginning of statement ten marks the introduction of the second accompanying theme.

2.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

2.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

There are thirteen statements of the six measure ostinato theme. Seven of the thirteen statements are exact, while there are slight deviations in length in the other six statements so that the overall length is one hundred and three measures as opposed to the seventy eight measures which thirteen exact statements would give.

The overall time-span is 5.45 minutes. [6]

2.3.2 Sectionalization

This ostinato theme is based on the mixolydian mode. As it lacks a highly chromatic nature, it creates a minimum of sectionalization. Furthermore, the lowered leading note ending creates a strong forward propulsion.

3. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

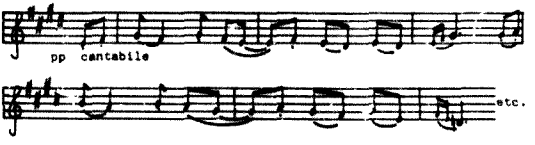
3.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

Two themes predominate in the accompaniment. The first theme, which dominates the first main section of the passacaglia, is introduced by the first violin in conjunction with the first statement of the ostinato. This theme is, in fact, an expanded form of the rising and falling contour of the ostinato, rising as it does from E^4-G^4 sharp, and then falling back to D^4.

---

[6] The measurement of the time-span has been based on the following recording: B. Britten, String Quartet no. 3, with Amadeus String Quartet: Norbert Brainin, Siegmund Nissel, Peter Schidlof, Martin Lovett, Decca SXL 6893, 1963.

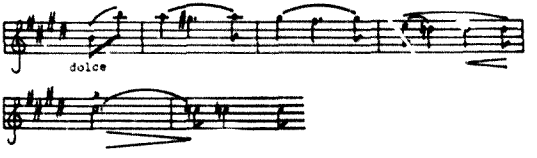
Ex. 8: First accompanying theme [7]



This theme is heard successively on the first violin, the second violin and the viola. In statement eight which concludes the first main section of the movement, the viola takes over the ostinato, while the first accompanying theme is given to the double bass at the dominant.

The counterpoints which are added when the first accompanying theme is given to the second violin and viola are also basically scalic and are all expansions and developments of the counterpoint below.

Ex. 9: Counterpoint to the first accompanying theme [8]



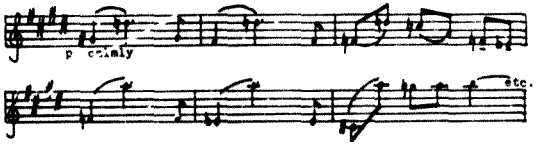
The second accompanying theme is introduced following a brief transitional passage, at the tenth statement of the ostinato, during the middle section of the passacaglia. The frequent leaps of this second theme contrast strongly with the scalic nature of the first accompanying theme.

---

[7] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, p. 31.

[8] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, p. 32.

Ex. 10: Second accompanying theme [9]



The final section of the passacaglia sees a return to the first accompanying theme.

The use of the first accompanying theme spans eight statements of the ostinato before giving way to a transitional passage which leads to the second accompanying theme which in turn spans two statements of the ostinato. Thereafter, there is a return to the first accompanying theme.

Both accompanying themes are far more active rhythmically than the ostinato. Both, furthermore, far exceed the tritone range of the ostinato.

3.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

3.2.1 Octave register

With the exception of statement eight, the accompaniment appears above the ostinato throughout. The rise of the ostinato above the first accompanying theme in statement eight coincides with the conclusion of the first formal section of the passacaglia.

3.2.2 Tone colour

In the first section of this passacaglia, Britten relies on an additive approach. The ostinato is given to the celio and the upper three voices are introduced successively each with the first accompanying theme against which an additional counterpoint is heard.

In the eighth statement of the ostinato, the ostinato is given to the viola while the first accompanying theme is heard on the cello.

---

[9] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, p. 35.

There is thus a gradual increase of tone colour in the accompaniment during the first eight statements of the ostinato.

The transitional passage, beginning at statement nine of the ostinato, sees a high concentration of both dynamics and rhythmic activity in all the accompanying parts.

The middle section starting at statement ten, brings a change of tone colour with both the second violin and viola assigned a background role, while the first violin is in the foreground with the second accompanying theme. This status quo is retained in the final section, but the rhythmic activity of the second violin and viola declines further.

Thus, there is an increase in weight up to the end of statement nine of the ostinato, after which there is a gradual decline.

3.2.3 Texture

Textural changes are made gradually throughout the passacaglia, resulting in a pattern of gradual growth up to the end of statement nine of the ostinato, followed by a gradual falling away.

3.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

3.3.1 Sectionalization

Both the first and second accompanying themes each span two statements of the ostinato, and this helps to lessen the sectional effect of the constantly recurring ostinato by focusing attention on a longer unit than that of the ostinato.

3.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

In this passacaglia, the accompaniment dominates the ostinato throughout and is responsible for creating the formal profile of the passacaglia.

3.3.3 Grouping

Grouping in this passacaglia is effected by the use of the two accompanying themes. The first eight statements of the ostinato are grouped by the consistent use above it of the first accompanying theme (see Ex. 8, p. 233). The subsequent recurrence of this material in

the final stages of the passacaglia (statements twelve and thirteen) unifies the passacaglia by creating a sense of return.

Thus, the return creates a formal shape, at least from a thematic point of view.

The second accompanying theme (see Ex. 10, p. 234) plays a less important role, though it too serves to group together several statements.

4. MOTION FACTORS

4.1 THE PARAMETERS

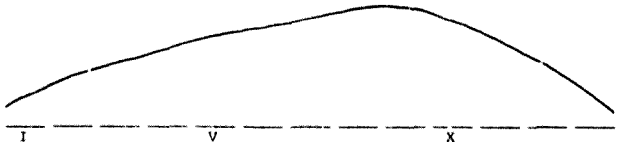
4.1.1 Density

A pattern of progressive density is established during the early stages of this passacaglia. This results from the use of additive counterpoint.

During the second and the final sections (statement ten onwards), there are long sections in which the density remains unchanged. This is probably due to the limitations of the medium which uses only the possibilities of four instruments.

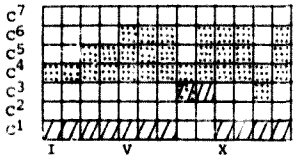
The density level reaches a peak in statement nine of the ostinato, and thereafter there is a dropping off to the end of the passacaglia.

Ex. 11: Density profile



4 '.2 **Range**

Ex. 12: Range (/// = ostinato; ⁚⁚ = accompaniment)

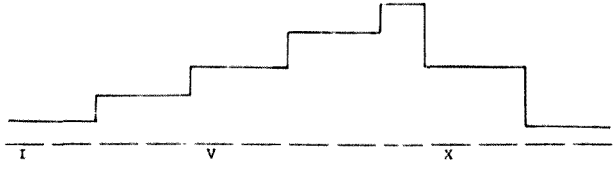


A gradual widening of range concentration in the accompaniment occurs in the initial stages of this passacaglia (statements one to seven of the ostinato). Thereafter, there are some sudden shifts in the concentration of the range in statements eight and twelve. The narrowing of range concentration in statement eight coincides with the end of the first main section of the passacaglia, and in statement twelve it coincides with the beginning of the final section.

4.1.3 Dynamics

The dynamic profile is that of an arch. On the upward curve the dynamics increase by stages, with each stage occupying two statements of the ostinato. The peak of the dynamic arch profile is reached in statement nine, after which the dynamic level decreases by stages, reaching its lowest point at the end of the passacaglia. As on the upward curve of the arch, each of the dynamic stages on the downward curve occupies two statements of the ostinato.

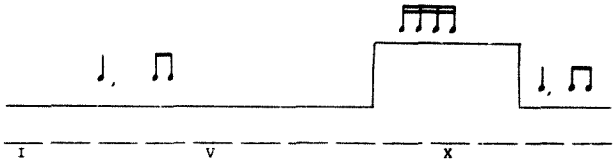
Ex. 13: Dynamic profile



4.1.4 Rhythm

As is the case with the dynamics, the rhythmic changes take place in stages. The initial stage is of considerable length and covers the first eight statements of the ostinato. During this stage the rhythmic movement is predominantly by quarter notes and eighth notes. This is followed by a stepping up of rhythmic activity in the following three statements (nine to eleven), where the predominant movement is by sixteenth notes. The final two statements of the ostinato see the rhythmic activity drop off to that of the opening eight statements.

Ex. 14: Rhythmic profile



4.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

In this passacaglia the density, dynamics, rhythm and range all collaborate to reach a peak in statement nine of the ostinato. Thereafter, there is a gradual drop in both the density and dynamics to the end of the passacaglia. The rhythm and range, on the other hand, remain at a peak until the end of statement eleven, and thus maintain vitality while the other parameters are already on a downward curve.

There are interesting wide contrasts of range in the final statement. These are used as a means of changing colour contrasts.

4.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

Several factors are responsible for the sense of finality in this passacaglia.

In the first place, the return in the accompaniment of the initial accompanying theme, creates a feeling of recapitulation.

Secondly, the decline of all the parameters, with the exception of the range, in the closing stages, creates a feeling of conclusion and repose.

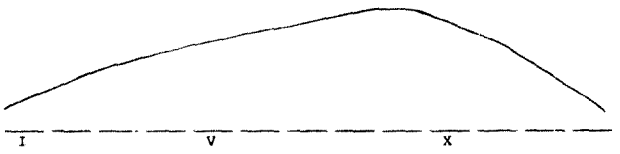
Thirdly, a broadening effect is created by the process of spinning out the final statement of the ostinato to seventeen measures as opposed to the original six measures.

All the above-mentioned factors combined produce a very strong feeling of finality.

5. FORMAL PLAN

The overall formal profile of this passacaglia is that of an arch, reaching a peak shortly after the mid-point, in statement nine, and thereafter dropping off gradually to the end of the passacaglia.

Ex. 15: Formal profile



5.1 LARGER FORM

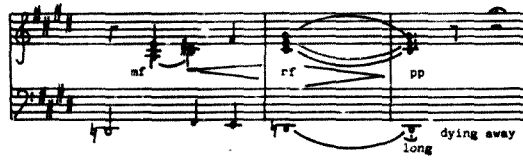
This passacaglia movement concludes a multimovement work. There is a strong thematic link between the ostinato and the main theme of the opening movement (see paragraph 2.1.10, p. 228 above). This thematic tie is strengthened by the fact that the main accompanying theme of the passacaglia is basically an expansion of the rising and falling contour of the ostinato.

Britten also capitalizes here on the passacaglia's capacity to establish a tonal centre. The tonal centres of the five movements are as follows (the tonal centre of the passacaglia movement is underlined):

B^{b} G C <u>E</u>.

The passacaglia is based on the tonal centre of E, a tritone removed from the B flat of the opening movement. The ending, however, remains tonally ambiguous.

Ex. 16: Ending of passacaglia [10]



[10] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, p. 37.

CHAPTER 15

FINDINGS

1. THE NATURE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

1.1 STRUCTURE

1.1.1 Sequence

Of the thirteen passacaglias analysed, only two ostinato themes (those from the "Agnus Dei" of the *War Requiem* and from *Billy Budd*) show no sequential treatment whatever.

Exact sequences, both rhythmic and melodic occur in the ostinato themes from the Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto, "Death, be not proud!" from the *Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, and *Noye's Fludde*.

In *Noye's Fludde* the fourth statement of the sequential motive is rhythmically accelerated. Each appearance of the motive is a whole tone above the previous appearance (see Ex. 1, p. 175).

Rhythmic sequences occur in the ostinato themes of the passacaglias from *Peter Grimes*, *Albert Herring*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and the String Quartet no. 3.

An interesting feature of the rhythmic sequence in the String Quartet no. 3 is that it is coupled with melodic inversion rather than melodic sequence (see Ex. 1, p. 226).

The ostinato theme from the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* consists of five phrases. Each of the first four phrases begins with a repeated open chord followed by a stepwise passage. This can be regarded as sequence in the broadest sense in that the overall structure of the phrases is the same (see Ex. 1, p. 205).

Sequence, then, is a conspicuous characteristic of these ostinato themes. The most frequently used type is the exact sequence of both pitch and rhythmic relationships.

1.1.2 Characteristic intervals

With the exception of the ostinato theme from *Albert Herring*, all the other themes are characterized by a predominance of one or more

intervals. The ostinato theme from the Violin Concerto, for example, consists entirely of stepwise movement in tones and semitones (see Ex. 1, p. 45). The ostinato themes from "Death, be not proud!" and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* are also dominated by movement in tones and semitones (see Ex. 1, p. 91 and Ex. 1, p. 205).

Semitone movement predominates in the ostinato theme of the "Dirge" (see Ex. 1, p. 61), while the ostinato theme from the String Quartet no. 3 consists entirely of movement by whole tones (see Ex. 1, p. 226).

In many of the ostinato themes the preponderance of certain intervals results from the use of melodic quence as, for example, in *Noye's Fludde* and the Piano Concerto.

Concentration on specific intervals within the ostinato theme gives a highly unified structure to the theme.

Of the thirteen ostinato themes analysed, only one, that from *Albert Herring* begins and ends on the same note. Eleven of the themes have an interval of an octave or less between their first and final notes. The most frequently used connecting intervals are the semitone ("Death, be not proud!", *Noye's Fludde*, and the "Agnus Dei") and the octave (Piano Concerto, "Dirge", *Peter Grimes*).

All three of the themes which end an octave apart both begin and end on the tonic. Of the three semitone intervals, only one (*Noye's Fludde*) is a leading note ending, the others being subdominant ("Death, be not proud!") and submediant ("Agnus Dei").

Britten has broken away from the Baroque preference for dominant endings. Not a single one of these ostinato themes ends on the dominant.

The extremely wide connecting interval of two octaves plus a perfect fourth occurs in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*.

The progressive introduction of the ostinato theme in *The Turn of the Screw* results in a changing connecting interval. However, the interval of an octave is exceeded in only two instances, namely, between statements fifteen and sixteen (minor ninth) and statements sixteen and seventeen (minor tenth), while the most frequently used connecting interval in this passacaglia is a major sixth.

It would therefore seem that the concentration on narrow connecting intervals of an octave or less is a means to ensure smooth repetitions

of the ostinato theme and thus minimize the sectional effect of these repetitions.

1.1.3 Chordal influence

With the exceptions of the ostinato themes from *Albert Herring*, *Billy Budd*, *Noye's Fludde* and the String Quartet no. 3, all the themes analysed in this study show some chordal influence either of a major, minor or diminished triad or seventh chord.

1.1.4 Tetrachord influence

Britten has shaken off the influence of the descending and ascending tetrachord which were such an integral part of the basso ostinato pieces during the Baroque. None of these ostinato themes shows any influence of the tetrachord.

1.1.5 Tritone influence

The influence of the tritone is strongly in evidence in four of the themes (*Peter Grimes*, *Noye's Fludde*, "Agnus Dei" and String Quartet no. 3). This melodic use of the tritone is a specifically twentieth-century trait.

1.1.6 Contour

Britten has used a wide variety of contours in these ostinato themes, with a slight preference for the arch contour and the declining contour.

Ex. 1: Contours of ostinato themes

Arch

Violin Concerto
Albert Herring
String Quartet no. 3

Inverse Arch

"Agnus Dei"
Symphony for Cello and Orchestra

Rise

The Turn of the Screw

Modified Rise

The Rape of Lucretia
Noye's Fludde

Decline

"Dirge"
Peter Grimes
Billy Budd

Decline plus Arch

Piano Concerto

Decline plus Gradual Rise with Interruption

"Death, be not proud!"

The themes with an arch or inverse arch contour reach their peak just prior to, or immediately following, the midpoint of the theme. In the Piano Concerto in which an arch contour is outlined in each of the two phrases of the ostinato theme, the peak of each of these arch contours occurs at the midpoint of each of the phrases.

The themes from both *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Noye's Fludde* exhibit a rising profile, but show a slight decline at the end of the rise. The overall aural impression, however, remains that of a rising contour. They have therefore been classified as contours with a modified rise.

1.1.7 Length

A wide diversity of theme lengths is used.

Ex. 2: Lengths of ostinato themes

Two measures

The Rape of Lucretia
Billy Budd
"Agnus Dei"

Two and three quarter measures

Peter Grimes

Four measures

Noye's Fludde

Five measures

"Death, be not proud"
Albert Herring

Five and three eighths measures

Violin Concerto

Five and seven eighths measures

"Dirge"

Six measures

String Quartet no. 3

Nine measures

Piano Concerto

Twenty six measures

Symphony for Cello and Orchestra

The above list illustrates that Britten has used some highly unusual theme lengths ("Dirge", *Peter Grimes*, Violin Concerto, Piano Concerto, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*).

The Turn of the Screw has a fluctuating theme length due to the cumulative presentation of the theme and the constantly changing rhythmic structure on each presentation. The lengths of the presentations vary from three measures (statements one and two) to twenty six measures (statement seventeen).

The favoured Baroque four measure ostinato theme length features in only one of these passacaglias (*Noye's Fludde*).

Another interesting feature which emerges from the list of theme lengths above is Britten's frequent use of asymmetrical lengths which have a precedent in the five measure theme of Brahms's *Variations on a Theme by Haydn*, Op. 56a.

1.1.8 Tonal centre

Although some of the ostinato themes are highly chromatic, for example, the theme from the Violin Concerto, nevertheless, they all relate to a tonal centre.

A certain tonal fixation is inevitable by the mere fact of the continuous repetition of the ostinato theme which impresses its contour and sequence of motives on the composition as a whole.

1.1.9 Metre and tempo

The following is a list of the metres and tempos used in the passacaglias in this study.

Ex. 3: Metres and tempos

Piano Concerto	2/2 (4/4)	Andante lento (♩ = 46-50)
Violin Concerto	4/4	Andante lento (un poco meno mosso) (♩ = 52-54)
"Dirge"	4/4	Alla marcia grave (♩ = 60)
Peter Grimes	4/4	Andante moderato (♩ = 56)
"Death, be not proud!"	4/4	Allegro molto moderato e sostenuto (♩ = 63)
The Rape of Lucretia	4/4	Alla marcia grave (l'istesso tempo) (♩ = 56-66)
Albert Herring	4/8 & 3/8	Slow (♪ = 56)
Billy Budd	6/8	(♩. = 60)
The Turn of the Screw	3/4	Slow and regular (♩ = 80)
Noye's Fludde	4/2	Steady minims (𝅗𝅥 = 69-72)
"Agnus Dei"	5/16	Slow (♪ = 80)
Symphony for Cello and Orchestra	2/2 & 3/2	Andante allegro (♩ = c. 84)
String Quartet no. 3	3/4	Slowly moving (♩ = c. 50)

In contrast to the favoured simple triple metre of Baroque passacaglias, Britten has favoured simple quadruple metre.

Another interesting feature of these passacaglias which is not encountered in Baroque passacaglias is the use of changing metres within the ostinato theme. This occurs in both *Albert Herring* (4/8 and 3/8) and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* (2/2 and 3/2).

Britten has scrupulously assigned a metronome indication to each of these passacaglias. During the Baroque period the designation "Passacaglia" was an indication of the mood and tempo of the piece and did not require any further qualification.

Britten seems to have adopted a somewhat slower tempo for his passacaglias than was the norm during the Baroque period. Curt Sachs gives the tempo of ♩ = 63-100 as being the accepted tempo of the passacaglia in France during the first half of the eighteenth century. [1] Eight of the thirteen passacaglias in this study are slower than the tempo given by Sachs.

However, according to L'Affilarde's tables which Erich Schwandt regards as a fairly accurate guide to the tempos of early eighteenth-century music, the tempo of the passacaglia is ♩ = 50. [2] Three of these passacaglias fall below this suggested tempo.

Ten of the passacaglias are faster than the tempo of L'Affilard, but all of them fall within the upper limit of the tempo given by Sachs.

Thus, while there is conflicting opinion concerning the exact tempo of Baroque passacaglias, it seems that at the upper end of the scale Britten falls within the accepted limits, while on occasions he adopts a slower tempo than was the norm during the Baroque period.

With the exceptions of the Violin Concerto and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, these passacaglias retain their initial tempo throughout without much deviation. The passacaglia of the Violin Concerto sees a marked reduction of tempo at the beginning of the coda, while the fantasy-like interlude of the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* breaks away from the tempo of the rest of the passacaglia.

1.1.10 Rhythm

Britten has used some interesting contemporary rhythmic devices in these ostinato themes which do not occur in Baroque passacaglias.

Syncopation is used as a means for creating tension and restlessness in the ostinato themes from the Violin Concerto, *Noye's Fludde*, *Billy Budd* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*.

Anacrusis, which was used fairly frequently in Baroque ostinato themes occurs in only two of these themes, namely "Death, be not proud!" and *The Rape of Lucretia*.

---

[1] C. Sachs, *Rhythm and Tempo* (New York: Norton, 1953), p. 316.

[2] E. Schwandt, "L'Affilarde," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie, Vol. X, p. 358.

An interesting feature of the ostinato theme from *Noye's Fludde* is the rhythmic activity of the first beat (see Ex. 3, p. 217). while in the Violin Concerto rhythmic activity falls in the first half of the measure in the first two measures of the theme (see Ex. 1, p. 45). Both these practices are in strong contrast with the favoured trochaic rhythm of Baroque passacaglias in which the greater rhythmic activity falls in the latter part of the measure. Furthermore, in none of these passacaglias has Britten used a trochaic rhythmic pattern.

An unusual feature of the ostinato theme from the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* is the use of running scalic passages.

The avoidance of metric accents in the ostinato theme from *Peter Grimes* creates a subtle, free-flowing rhythm. A further device in *Peter Grimes* which is probably unique in twentieth-century passacaglias, is the occurrence of the ostinato one beat earlier on each repetition. This ingenuous device generates tremendous vitality within the theme, and furthermore has the effect of grouping the reiterations of the ostinato into larger groups of four statements each. This creates a type of macro-rhythm for the ostinato theme spanning each group of four statements.

In general, the rhythmic activity of these ostinato themes is fairly subdued. The middle-range theme of the "Dirge" is more active rhythmically than any of the other themes. This could be attributed to the fact that it is a middle-range and not a low-range ostinato theme. On the other hand, however, the ostinato theme from the Piano Concerto, while also a middle-range theme, does not show a greater rhythmic activity than the low-range themes

1.1.11 Melodic tension

Apart from the four themes which are totally diatonic ("Death, be not proud!", *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Billy Budd*, String Quartet no. 3) all the other themes exhibit varying levels of chromaticism from only slight chromaticism (*Albert Herring*) to a very high degree of chromaticism (*The Turn of the Screw*), where the chromaticism symbolizes the tightening of the Screw.

A device used in Baroque ostinato themes to generate momentum is the open-ended dominant ending. Britten uses this device in the

Violin Concerto and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. However, the ostinato themes from both *Noye's Fludde* and the String Quartet no. 3 have leading note endings which also create a compelling forward momentum. Other open-ended endings used are the subdominant ("Death, be not proud!") mediant (*Billy Budd*) and submediant ("Agnus Dei").

1.1.12 Derivation

None of the passacaglias in this study is an isolated movement. They all belong within the framework of multi-movement forms. The overall thematic organization of such forms may be such that the ostinato theme of the passacaglia is based on previously heard material.

Five of these ostinato themes (*Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*) are derived completely or in part from earlier material.

Change of register to a lower register is the most frequent alteration of the thematic material when it is used as an ostinato theme. Rhythmic alterations frequently cause a complete change of character when the theme or motive is used as an ostinato. Britten, however, has not concurred with the Baroque predilection for triple metre. Only in *The Turn of the Screw* does he change the original simple quadruple metre to simple triple metre for most of the presentations of the ostinato.

Thus, in these passacaglias, the most basic change when previously used thematic material functions as an ostinato is that of a change of register.

1.1.13 Conclusions

The most obvious characteristics of the ostinato themes of Baroque passacaglias were the four or eight measure length, slow triple metre, trochaic rhythmic pattern and the tetrachord influence.

Britten has used a wide diversity of theme lengths in these passacaglias and has shown no preference for the four or eight measure theme. While he has preferred a slow tempo for all the passacaglias, only in the String Quartet no. 3 and some of the statements of the ostinato in *The Turn of the Screw* does he use triple metre.

He has also abandoned the Baroque preference for trochaic rhythms.

Interesting rhythmic innovations occur in *Peter Grimes*. Furthermore, while the typically twentieth-century trait of the melodic use of the tritone is prominent in many of these themes, there is no evidence of the influence of the tetrachord.

1.2 USE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

1.2.1 First statement setting

Eight of the thirteen passacaglias in this study have accompanied first statements. This is in accordance with the usual Baroque practice. The remaining five passacaglias have unaccompanied first statements and in this regard follow the precedent of Bach's C minor Passacaglia. The relatively large number of unaccompanied first statements is perhaps symptomatic of a linear approach to composition.

An unaccompanied first statement can be regarded as a type of introduction in that it allows for the unfettered presentation of the raw material prior to any variation taking place.

The accompanied first statement, on the other hand, can also be viewed as a type of introduction in that the setting is usually fairly meagre and subsequent statements generally contain more intense accompanying material so that a pattern of growth is established.

Thus, both unaccompanied and accompanied first statements function as lowpoints which initiate a rising profile.

1.2.2 Variations in length

Most of these passacaglias either retain a constant ostinato theme length throughout, or are subjected to only occasional minor modifications of the theme length.

Habitual deviations from the original length of the ostinato theme, however, indicate a freer approach based on a flexible theme length, such as is the case in the Violin Concerto, *The Turn of the Screw* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. It is possible that in these passacaglias Britten may have been influenced by the "free" passacaglias of Berg (*Fünf Orchesterlieder* and *Wozzeck*) and Schoenberg (*Pierrot Lunaire*), whose pitch series passacaglias presuppose a constantly changing theme length. In each statement, the interest is focussed on the new rhythmic guise of the ostinato theme.

1.2.3 Variations in tone colour

Variation of the tone colour of the ostinato is an integral part of the variation procedure when it is applied to the orchestral medium. Even within the confines of the bass registers, changes in instrumentation can effect variations in doubling, timbre and intensity.

A simple means of varying the tone colour is to add to or reduce the orchestral weight. Most of these passacaglias rely to some degree on this additive method of increasing the intensity of the ostinato theme (for example, *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*). Within such a crescendo, vitality can be infused by varying the orchestral combinations.

Another possibility is to retain the tone colour of the ostinato theme unchanged throughout. This Britten does in the passacaglia of the "Dirge". When this occurs, the entire responsibility for creating interest and vitality of tone colour rests with the accompaniment.

In the passacaglia from *Peter Grimes* Britten has used a highly original and imaginative method of tone colour variation, in that each variation of the viola theme above the ostinato is accompanied by a new tone colour in the ostinato itself. An overall crescendo is created by the use of the additive method of increasing intensity by weight, while within this crescendo, there are variations of the instrumental combinations.

1.2.4 Tempo changes

The majority of these passacaglias maintain a fairly constant tempo throughout. The one exception is the passacaglia from the Violin Concerto which sees a sudden marked drop in tempo in the coda. This drop in tempo in the concluding stages of this passacaglia can be seen as a broadening process as the passacaglia draws to a conclusion.

Britten's maintenance of a fairly constant tempo in these passacaglias follows the traditional approach in contrast to the passacaglias of some twentieth-century composers which are subjected to many changes of tempo during their course. The passacaglia from Berg's *Wozzeck*, for example, is subjected to a constantly fluctuating tempo scheme in which almost every variation has a different tempo. Webern's Passacaglia, Op. 1 is also subjected to many tempo changes.

1.2.5 Variations in the fundamental pitch and intervallic structure

As was sometimes the case in Baroque passacaglias, for example Buxtehude's Passacaglia in D minor (see Ex. 11, p. 295), the ostinato theme is sometimes transposed to other fundamental pitches during the course of the passacaglia, for example in the Violin Concerto and *Billy Budd*. In the Violin Concerto, each of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale at some time functions as the fundamental note of the ostinato theme. A further feature of this passacaglia is that the exact intervallic structure of the ostinato theme is not retained throughout. In *Billy Budd* nine different pitches function as the fundamental note of the ostinato during the course of the passacaglia.

1.2.6 Other variations of the ostinato theme

Other variations include inversion of the ostinato theme in the Violin Concerto, *Billy Budd* and the "Agnus Dei". In *Noye's Fludde* the intervals of the pattern from which the sequence is derived remain intact, but the direction of the sequence is changed in that it becomes a falling sequence instead of a rising sequence.

Another interesting device is the use of elision in certain sections of the passacaglia from *Billy Budd*. The final note of one statement of the ostinato functions as the first note of the following statement.

1.2.7 Theme drop-out and theme fragmentation

Minor drop-outs of the ostinato theme occur in the Piano Concerto, *Billy Budd*, the "Agnus Dei" and the String Quartet no. 3. More extensive drop-outs, however, occur in *Albert Herring*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Noye's Fludde* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*.

In both *The Turn of the Screw* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, the drop-out of the ostinato is associated with a drop in intensity. In *The Turn of the Screw* the drop-out occurs immediately following the peak of the arch, while in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* it occurs during an interruption of the gradual rise profile.

Extensive fragmentation occurs in *The Turn of the Screw* as a result of the cumulative method of presenting the ostinato theme.

In the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* fragmentation occurs in statement five of the ostinato theme immediately preceding the total drop-out of the ostinato.

Fairly extensive use of fragmentation occurs in the Violin Concerto. The considerable freedom and licence which Britten exhibits in the use of this ostinato theme includes marked variations in length, interval structure and rhythm in addition to fragmentation. In section ten the fragmentation coincides with the declining arch contour, while in section three it is associated with a rising contour.

Several of the ostinato themes exhibit fragmentation of the ostinato theme in the closing stages or final statement ("Death, be not proud!", *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Noye's Fludde* and the String Quartet no. 3). This can be seen as a process of broadening towards the conclusion of the passacaglia.

1.2.8 Audibility of the ostinato theme

Similarity of repetition is essential if a theme is to be recognizable. If the repetitions are too elaborately varied, their connection with the original theme will be lost. In all but one of the passacaglias analysed, the ostinato is clearly audible. In *The Turn of the Screw*, however, the cumulative presentation as well as the constantly changing rhythmic structure of the ostinato render it rather obscure.

Two radically different approaches are presented by contemporary passacaglias. Either the ostinato is a true ostinato around which the accompanying material is varied, or, on the other hand, the main interest may be in variation of the ostinato theme itself while the accompanying material is of secondary importance.

The idea of varying the ostinato is not essentially a twentieth-century innovation. Many Baroque composers, notably Handel for example in his Suite no. 7 (see Ex. 5, p. 289) often presented highly ornamented versions of their ostinato themes.

Britten has generally adopted the more conservative approach of variation above the ostinato in his passacaglias. However, in *The Turn of the Screw* and the Violin Concerto he has combined this with expansion of the ostinato. In the Violin Concerto, however, the contour of the theme remains constant, while in *The Turn of the Screw* the contour of the first six notes of the theme remains constant.

1.2.9 Octave register

Traditionally most passacaglia themes are basso ostinati, that is,

they occur in the bass registers and are constantly reiterated more or less unchanged. While there may be occasional excursions into the upper registers, the ostinati are predominantly confined to the bass registers.

Most of the passacaglias in this study follow this traditional stance. However, there are also several full-range ostinati, namely those from the Piano Concerto, Violin Concerto, "Death, be not proud!" *The Rape of Lucretia*. In the Piano Concerto all registers are freely exploited by the ostinato throughout the passacaglia.

However, there is usually some correlation between the formal profile and the exploitation of the upper and lower registers. In the Violin Concerto, the lowest register is used at the peak of the arch profile, while in *The Rape of Lucretia* the invasion of the upper registers occurs immediately prior to the final surge to the climax. In "Death, be not proud!", on the other hand, the invasion of the upper registers corresponds with the interruptions in the formal profile.

In the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, the ostinato is predominantly bass orientated, but rises to the middle registers at the peak of the rising contour.

The ostinato of the "Dirge" is presented in the mid-range throughout.

Apart from the Violin Concerto, all these ostinati which are not confined to the bass registers, are, nevertheless, the lowest sounding part throughout. In the Violin Concerto, however, the lowest registers are not dominated by the ostinato, and the accompaniment is frequently the lowest sounding part.

The following are some observations on the ostinato theme's octave register:

- The early stages of the passacaglia, during which time a rising contour is usually being established, are not prone to marked changes of register.
- Excursions into the upper registers frequently occur just prior to the peak of a rising or arch profile.
- The one instance of a sudden drop in register (Violin Concerto) reinforces the culmination of a rise.

1.2.10 Conclusions

Britten has brought a varied approach to his treatment of the ostinato themes in these passacaglias. The first statement settings are either unaccompanied or fairly meagre. However, it is the manipulation of the ostinati in subsequent statements which creates the greatest interest. The theme lengths, tone colour, rhythm, and octave registers have all been subjected to variation. However, in only one instance, *The Turn of the Screw* has the extent of this variation made the ostinato unrecognizable. Here, Britten has used the technique of variation of the ostinato as well as variation of the setting of the ostinato.

1.3 INFLUENCE OF THE OSTINATO THEME

The structure of the passacaglia is one of continuous repetition of the ostinato theme. Consequently, this ever-present theme will exert a strong influence on the movement as a whole and will impart its characteristics such as contour, rhythm, tonal centre on the larger framework of the composition, especially when it is used as a strict ostinato.

1.3.1 Effect on length; time-span

In the passacaglias from the Violin Concerto and *The Turn of the Screw* the extreme freedom with which the ostinato theme is used results in there being no direct relationship between the length of the ostinato theme and the length of the passacaglia as a whole.

The passacaglia from the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* has the fewest repetitions of the ostinato theme while that from *Peter Grimes* has the most repetitions. It is interesting that *Peter Grimes* has one of the shortest ostinato themes (two and three quarter measures) while the twenty six measure ostinato theme from the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* is by far the longest ostinato theme in this study. While the ostinato from *Peter Grimes* is presented thirty nine times, that from the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* is stated only six times. There thus seems to be a type of inverse relationship between the length of the ostinato theme and the number of its presentations.

1.3.2 Sectionalization

The difference between the passacaglia and the theme-with-variation form

lies in the continuousness of the variation in the passacaglia, whereas in the theme-with-variations form the individual variations are usually clearly marked off from each other. Nevertheless, despite the continuousness of the variation in the passacaglia the constant repetition of the ostinato results in a certain sectional effect.

Themes which create a minimum of sectionalization are usually diatonic with little or no chromaticism, for example the themes from *Peter Grimes*, "Death, be not proud!", *Albert Herring*, *Billy Budd* and the String Quartet no. 3.

Despite the highly chromatic nature of the ostinato in *The Turn of the Screw*, the constant fluctuations of length, rhythm and audibility minimize the sectional effect.

A high degree of sectionalization occurs in the ostinato themes from the Piano Concerto, the "Agnus Dei" and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*.

In the Violin Concerto, the constant variations of length, rhythm, tone colour, octave register and audibility result in a varying pattern of sectionalization.

2. THE ACCOMPANIMENT

2.1 TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

While it is possible for the first statement of the ostinato to be unaccompanied, thereafter some accompanying elements will always be heard with the ostinato.

Throughout these passacaglias Britten has favoured an accompaniment based predominantly on a single theme. Nine of the thirteen accompaniments are based on a single theme.

In the table below the accompaniment of each passacaglia is classified according to its predominant accompaniment type.

Ex. 4: Accompaniment types

Single theme	Two themes
"Dirge" *Peter Grimes* "Death, be not proud!" *Albert Herring* *The Rape of Lucretia* *Billy Budd* *Noye's Fludde* "Agnus Dei" *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*	String Quartet no. 3
	Counterpoint
	Piano Concerto *The Turn of the Screw*
	Melodic motives
	Violin Concerto

In general, the accompaniments have a wider range than the ostinato themes, and are also rhythmically more active. An interesting exception occurs in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, where the ostinato is both rhythmically more active than the accompanying theme and has a wider range.

2.2 THE ACCOMPANIMENT VARIED

2.2.1 Octave register

Regardless of the type of accompanying material used, it usually appears above the ostinato. Seven of these th-teen passacaglias have accompaniments the upper limits of which remain either entirely above the ostinato or have only occasional brief excursions below the level of the ostinato.

If an accompaniment remains above the ostinato, there are two possiblities: either it will follow the ostinato's rises and falls if the ostinato is not confined to a specific octave register, or it will remain fairly constant above a static ostinato.

An example of the first method occurs in the passacaglia from *Billy Budd*. Britten uses the second method more frequently than the first, for example in *Peter Grimes* and *Noye's Fludde*.

In the remaining five passacaglias the accompaniment appears both above and below the ostinato. In no instance does an accompaniment remain consistently below the ostinato, as is the case for example in the Passacaglia finale of Ernest Bloch's Concerto Grosso no. 2 for Strings.

In those passacaglias in which the accompaniment appears both above and below the ostinato either the register of the ostinato will

remain constant, or both the accompaniment and the ostinato will change registers freely.

The use of a static ostinato with a freely moving accompaniment occurs in "The Dirge". In this instance, the arch contour produced by the rise and fall of the accompaniment reinforces the overall formal arch profile.

In the passacaglia from *The Rape of Lucretia*, on the other hand, both the accompaniment and ostinato change registers freely while the accompaniment appears both above and below the ostinato.

2.2.2 Tone colour

In a passacaglia, the ostinato is usually confined to the low range instruments and is limited to unison or octave doublings. The accompaniment, however, has the entire registral and textural range at its disposal, and therefore the tone colour possibilities of the accompaniment are infinitely greater than is the case with the ostinato.

Britten has frequently used the method of additive crescendo for varying the tone colour of the accompaniment, as for example in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. Thus, the intensity is increased by weight and increases or decreases in weight contribute to a profile of growth or decline.

He has also frequently adopted the method of constantly changing orchestral colours to create vitality and momentum as, for example, in *Albert Herring*.

The passacaglia "Death, be not proud!" is the only one in this group which relies on the changing colours of the ostinato rather than of the accompaniment to create interest and forward movement.

2.2.3 Texture

The character of the ostinato combined with the specific type of accompanying material used with it, determines the total overall fabric of sound at any given point.

Changes of texture can either be abrupt or gradual. Sudden changes in texture will create an irregular growth profile. If these textural changes coincide with repetitions of the ostinato theme, a strongly sectional effect can be created, for example, in the Piano Concerto or the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* where a new texture

is used for each variation on the accompanying theme, each new variation coinciding with a repetition of the ostinato.

Gradual changes of texture create a pattern of gradual growth or decline.

Most of these passacaglias have a pattern of gradual textural changes, for example, the "Dirge", *Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia*.

2.2.4 Conclusions

In the passacaglias under study, Britten has given preference to an accompaniment based on a single theme. The accompaniment generally remains above the ostinato although there are instances in which the accompaniment appears both above and below the ostinato.

The tone colour is kept alive either by the method of additive crescendo or by constantly changing orchestral colours. In varying the textural fabric he has used both sudden and gradual changes of texture.

2.3 ROLE OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

It is the role of the accompaniment both to provide variation above the repetitions of the ostinato as well as to give an overall shape, that is, a feeling of growth or decline, to the passacaglia as a whole. In so doing, it is possible for it to focus attention on larger units than that of the constantly reiterated ostinato.

2.3.1 Sectionalization

In most of these passacaglias the accompaniment distracts from the sectional character of the ostinato by overlapping the repetitions, for example, *Peter Grimes* where the variations on the viola theme not only span several statements of the ostinato, but these variations usually do not coincide with the ostinato repetitions.

2.3.2 Accompaniment versus ostinato theme

The relationship between the ostinato theme and the accompaniment is not the same in all passacaglias, and may even vary within a single passacaglia. In the majority of the passacaglias in this study, the accompaniment has the dominant role, while the ostinato is a rhythmic as well as a harmonic support, for example, *Peter Grimes*, *Noye's Fludde*.

It is possible, however, for the ostinato to be the dominant factor, and this occurs in the Violin Concerto where the interest lies in the variations of the ostinato theme.

It is also possible that neither the ostinato nor the accompaniment dominates the passacaglia, but that they enjoy a fairly equal relationship, as, for example, in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* and the "Agnus Dei".

A further possibility is a variable relationship between the ostinato and the accompaniment within the same passacaglia. This approach is illustrated in the Piano Concerto and *Billy Budd*.

2.3.3 Grouping

Grouping into larger units than that of the ostinato theme is accomplished by the retention of rhythmic patterns in many of these passacaglias, for example, the Piano Concerto, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Noye's Fludde*.

The use of an accompanying theme to span several statements of the ostinato is also a means of grouping used by Britten in several of these passacaglias. In the "Dirge" the accompanying fugue theme serves to focus the attention on a longer unit than that of the ostinato theme. In *Peter Grimes* each of the variations on the accompanying viola theme spans several repetitions of the ostinato, and thus groups the repetitions of the ostinato into larger units.

By the reappearance of the same accompanying theme, rhythm or counterpoint at a later stage of the passacaglia, a sense of return and unity is created. In the Piano Concerto, for example, the accompaniment to the final statement of the ostinato recalls previously used accompanying counterpoints and rhythms. This restatement in a condensed form of much that has gone before creates a feeling of rounding off on the decline of the arch.

2.3.4 Conclusions

In the majority of these passacaglias the accompaniment has the dominant role and tends to distract from the reiterations of the ostinato by overlapping its repetitions. Both thematic and rhythmic groupings are used to create unity and cohesion. This has a precedent in the pairing of variations in the Baroque.

3. MOTION FACTORS

3.1 THE PARAMETERS

Grouping within the accompaniment is a means of creating forward momentum. Various devices within the ostinato theme itself can also create forward impetus, for example, the use of an open-ended theme, rhythmic motives which generate a motoristic effect, syncopation which creates a feeling of tension and restlessness. In *Peter Grimes* the device of beginning each repetition of the ostinato one beat earlier in the measure creates rhythmic vitality and motion.

However, apart from these minor factors which affect motion, the factors which are most directly responsible for shaping the profile of the passacaglia are the density, range, dynamics and rhythm.

3.1.1 Density

Changes in density can be made progressively, irregularly or in stages. Within each passacaglia, however, one of these methods usually predominates.

When the changes are made in stages, these stages frequently correspond with the repetitions of the ostinato, as for example in the Piano Concerto, *Noye's Fludde* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. In "Death, be not proud!" the stages correspond with the stanzas of the text.

The use of progressive changes occurs for example in the "Dirge", *Peter Grimes* and *The Turn of the Screw*.

The most frequent density profile in these passacaglias involves the arch either in isolation or combined with a rise or double rise.

None of these passacaglias exhibits the irregular changes of density which characterize some twentieth-century passacaglias, as, for example, the passacaglia from Berg's *Wozzeck*. These irregularly changing densities are created by the skilful contrasts of the vocal and orchestral resources of the piece.

3.1.2 Range

In most of these passacaglias, the lower extremity of range is fairly constant due to the presence of an ostinato. Much more freedom of movement is available in the upper extremity. Most of these passacag-

lias show a gradual widening or narrowing of the range concentration, while in others, progressive change is interspersed with sudden changes of range.

The passacaglia from the Piano Concerto is characterized by sudden contrasts of range, while in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* not only are there sudden contrasts in range-span, but there are also sudden shifts in the area of range concentration. In both these works, the use of contrasting colours and textures is a means of maintaining intensity and vitality.

3.1.3 Dynamics

The increases and decreases in the overall dynamic level play a highly formative role in the overall formal profile of a passacaglia. Motion is created by either an increase or decrease in loudness. A static dynamic level sustained over a long period will tend to thwart the growth profile.

An increase in the dynamic level is usually produced over several statements of the ostinato. Furthermore, it is generally not produced in one long progressive sweep, but usually results from several smaller rises each of which reaches a progressively higher dynamic level.

A decrease in the dynamic level can occur suddenly following the highpoint of a rising profile. In an arch profile the reduction in the dynamic level tends to occur more slowly, but is, nevertheless, usually concentrated within a shorter time-span than that of the crescendo on the upward curve of the arch.

In the passacaglias of this study, the changes of dynamic level most frequently occur in stages which often correspond with the repetitions of the ostinato. Each stage may span one or several statements of the ostinato. Furthermore, there may be a temporary decrease in the dynamic level within an overall rising profile. Examples of passacaglias in which the dynamic changes occur in stages are the Piano Concerto, *Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, *Noye's Fludde* and the String Quartet no. 3.

On occasions, these longer stages of dynamic motion are enlivened by the use of dynamic waves within the stages, as for example, in the passacaglias from the Violin Concerto, the "Dirge", "Death, be not proud", *Billy Budd*, the "Agnus Dei" and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*.

Dynamic waves alone are used to shape the dynamic profile of the passacaglia from *The Turn of the Screw*.

None of these passacaglias utilizes the method of gradual increases and decreases in the dynamic level in isolation from any other method. In the contemporary passacaglia literature, this method does occur, however, for example, in Weberns's Passacaglia, Op. 1.

3.1.4 Rhythm

In all these passacaglias the rhythmic changes are made in stages which very often correspond with the repetitions of the ostinato theme. These stages of rhythmic change form part of a larger scheme of either growth or decline in rhythmic activity.

3.2 INTERACTION OF PARAMETERS

In a passacaglia the shaping of the formal profile is dependent on the interaction of the parameters. Britten has manipulated the various parameters in diverse ways in order to create a forward momentum.

The most obvious way in which to create a gradually rising profile is to have all the parameters gradually progress in intensity. Within this overall rising profile some or all of the parameters may progress in stages.

This very close correlation of the parameters is demonstrated in the passacaglia from *Peter Grimes*, in which all the parameters correlate to form a gradually rising profile with a temporary highpoint about one-third of the way through the passacaglia.

In the passacaglia of the "Dirge" all the parameters correlate to form the upward curve of the arch profile. On the downward curve, however, there are several irregular surges of rhythmic activity.

The rhythm deviates from the overall profile more frequently than the other parameters. It often slows down at the peak of a rising contour or an arch contour when the parameters of density and dynamics are at a highpoint. Examples of such rhythmic divergence occur in "Death, be not proud!", *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *Noye's Fludde*.

On the other hand, it is often left to the rhythm to carry on the overall progress while the other parameters are at a lowpoint, as is the case in the passacaglias from the Violin Concerto and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*.

On the downward curve of an arch profile, the rhythm sometimes shows an increase of activity while the other parameters are declining as for example in the passacaglias from the "Agnus Dei", the "Dirge" and *The Turn of the Screw*. In this way vitality is maintained on the downward curve.

An interesting feature of the interruption of the gradual rise profile of the passacaglia in *Albert Herring* is the staggering of the interruption in the various parameters so that the interruption is less abrupt. In this way vitality and momentum are retained during the interruption.

The passacaglias from both *Noye's Fludde* and the "Agnus Dei" show some slight deviations of range on the downward curve of their arch profiles, as a means of creating changing colour contrasts.

3.3 SENSE OF FINALITY

By the end of any passacaglia a considerable amount of momentum has been built up, the characteristics of the ostinato theme have become embedded, and a pattern of rise or decline has been established. A feeling of conclusion will either have to be established during the last few statements of the ostinato, or by the addition of some other material.

A declining profile in the final stages of a passacaglia usually involves a decline in all the parameters with the occasional exception of the range. This decline will, of itself, following a period of high intensity, create a feeling of completion.

A conclusion following a rising profile is more difficult to achieve, and the sense of finality may need to be established by some such device as the addition of a coda or a short decline, the connection to new material, or a broadening of rhythm or of overall tempo.

Of the thirteen passacaglias analysed in this study, nine end on a lowpoint of the formal profile while the remaining four end on a highpoint. The rhythm is invariably at a lowpoint as a process of broadening is a most effective way of achieving a feeling of finality and conclusion.

In the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* the long gradual rise is brought to conclusion by the addition of a short coda. Another passacaglia in this study which makes use of a coda is that from *Billy*

Budd, where the coda is appended to the decline of the arch profile. However, the decline of the parameters on the downward curve of the arch profile of itself produces a feeling of conclusiveness, and the coda in this instance is superfluous to the conclusion of the passacaglia itself and is, instead, a short sweeping gesture which brings Act 1 of the opera to a dramatic close.

While the passacaglia form of itself does not include any form of recapitulation, nevertheless, frequently a sense of recapitulation is created by the return of previously used accompanying material above the repetitions of the ostinato. This is often accompanied by a broadening of the rhythm of the ostinato, as for example, in the passacaglias from the Piano Concerto, "Agnus Dei" and the String Quartet no. 3, all of which have arch profiles.

In the "Dirge" the ostinato is used as a framing device in that the opening unaccompanied statement is balanced at the end by an ostinato statement with very sparse accompaniment which fades into oblivion.

The passacaglia can be connected to another movement, and in such a case, the need for finality is avoided. In the passacaglia from *Peter Grimes*, for example, the long gradual rise plunges straight into the ensuing dramatic action of the opera. In the orchestral version of this passacaglia, however, there is a short coda reminiscent of the opening viola theme.

The addition of a short decline to an overall rising profile is another method of effecting a satisfactory conclusion as is the case in *Albert Herring*.

A general broadening effect created by the slowing down of rhythmic activity or a reduction in the overall tempo is also a means of creating an effective conclusion as, for example, in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* where, in the final statement of the ostinato theme, the accompanying theme is presented in much longer note values than is the case at any other point of this passacaglia.

An interesting device used on the downward curve of the arch profile in *The Rape of Lucretia* is the disintegration of the ostinato theme, following which the passacaglia dovetails into the ensueing dramatic action.

Thus, the following are the devices used for effecting a satisfactory conclusion in these passacaglias:

- the addition of a short coda
- recapitulation (usually associated with an arch profile)
- disintegration of the ostinato theme
- the addition of a short decline to an overall rising profile
- the dovetailing of the passacaglia into another movement or further dramatic action.

All these methods of effecting a close are usually associated with a broadening of the rhythm.

4. FORMAL PLAN

The passacaglia, being a monothematic form, does not have any contrasting theme or sections. It is not characterized by any major structural divisions but consists instead of numerous sections (ostinato repetitions) strung together to form a continuous movement. It is for this reason that the term "continuous variation" is used to describe the passacaglia.

As a passacaglia movement progresses, certain contours will arise resulting from the interaction of the parameters and these contours form the overall rising or declining intensity profile.

An examination of the passacaglias in this study reveals that increases in intensity are spread over longer periods of time than are the decreases of intensity. An unaccompanied or scantly accompanied opening followed by progressive growth in both density and dynamics in the accompaniment will create a rising profile. This rising profile may either be brought to a conclusion at its highpoint, or it may be followed by a falling profile, in which case an arch-like shape will result. It is also possible for both the rise and arch shapes to be combined to produce a more complex profile.

Below is a list of the profiles of the passacaglias in this study.

Ex. 5: Passacaglia profiles

Arch	Rise with Interruption
"Dirge"	*Peter Grimes*
The Rape of Lucretia	"Death, be not proud!"
The Turn of the Screw	*Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*
Noye's Fludde	
"Agnus Dei"	
String Quartet no. 3	
Rise plus Arch	**Double Rise plus Arch**
Piano Concerto	Violin Concerto
Modified rise	**Arch plus Rise**
Albert Herring	*Billy Budd*

The arch profile predominates in the passacaglias under study. In all these arch profiles the peak occurs in the second half of the profile so that the contour is in a state of rise for a longer period than it is in a state of decline.

The rising profile, on the other hand, gives greater opportunity for a variety of treatment in that the rise may be interrupted during its course or it may even be followed by a second rise.

The combination of the arch profile with a rising profile occurs only occasionally in this group of passacaglias.

4.1 LARGER FORM

During the twentieth century, composers have generally tended to veer away from the Baroque preference of composing passacaglias as independent pieces, and the majority of twentieth-century passacaglias form part of multi-movement works.

The following are examples of independent twentieth-century passacaglias:

N.V. Bertzon, Passacaglia for Piano, Op. 31 (1944)

A. Copland, Passacaglia for Piano (1922)

K. Jeppeson, Passacaglia for Organ (1965)

F. Martin, Passacaglia for Organ (1944)

A. Webern, Passacaglia for Orchestra, Op. 1 (1908)

S. Wolpe, Passacaglia for Piano, from *Four Studies for Piano on Basic Rows* (1935-1936).

The interesting feature of these independent passacaglias is that the majority of them are written for the medium of keyboard instruments.

The juxtaposition of the passacaglia with the fugue occurs occasionally in twentieth-century literature as, for example, in the Passacaglia-Fugato of Hindemith's String Quartet no. 4, where the fugato fulfills the function of a coda; in the Passacaglia of Hindemith's symphony *Die Harmonie der Welt* where the passacaglia is preceded by an introductory fugue; the Passacaglia-Fugato final movement of Walton's Symphony no. 2.

Britten has not made use of the juxtaposition of the passacaglia and fugue. He has, however, *combined* the two forms of passacaglia and fugue within one movement in the "Dirge".

All the passacaglias in this study are associated with other movements. Many of them are situated at or very near the end of these works, for example, the Violin Concerto, "Death, be not proud!", the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, while others are more centrally situated, for example, *Peter Grimes*, the "Dirge" and *Noye's Fludde*.

Passacaglias used at or near the end of multi-movement works give the opportunity for a return and confirmation of tonality as well as of previously used thematic material. Both the ostinato itself as well as the accompaniment may be thematically linked with earlier movements, as, for example, in the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* and the String Quartet no. 3.

When a passacaglia occurs in a more central position in a multi-movement work, it is frequently the focal point around which the tonal centres of other movements tend to gravitate, for example *Peter Grimes*. In this particular instance, both the ostinato and accompaniment are based on the key motive of the opera. It represents the turning point of the work after which Grimes's journey to self-destruction becomes inevitable.

4.2 RELATION OF LARGER FORM TO INTENSITY PROFILE

There appears to be no direct correlation between the intensity profile used and the placement of the passacaglia within the larger form.

Ex. 6: Location of passacaglias and intensity profiles

Piano Concerto	Central	Rise + Arch
Violin Concerto	End	Double Rise + Arch
"Dirge"	Central	Arch
Peter Grimes	Central	Rise
"Death, be not proud!"	End	Rise
The Rape of Lucretia	Near end	Arch
Albert Herring	Near end	Rise
Billy Budd	Central	Arch + Rise
The Turn of the Screw	Near end	Arch
Noye's Fludde	Central	Arch
"Agnus Dei"	Near end	Arch
Symphony for Cello and Orchestra	End	Rise
String Quartet no. 3	End	Arch

Arch contours and rising profiles occur in both central and final positions Thus, Britten has not favoured a particular type of profile for a particular position within a multi-movement work.

He has, however, shown a preference in the placing of his passacaglias within multi-movement works, in that they either occur in a more or less central position or at or near the end of the work. At no time is a passacaglia used as an introductory movement or in the early stages of a larger form.

4.3 CONCLUSIONS

In the passacaglias under study, Britten has shown a preference for the arch-type profile regardless of the position of the passacaglia within the overall framework of the larger composition.

Within the larger formal framework, Britten has favoured a central or final position for the passacaglia movements. In a central position the passacaglia frequently has a stabilizing influence and tends to function as a focal point, while, when used as a final movement, it has a confirming function.

CHAPTER 16

CONCLUSION

1. REVIVAL OF THE PASSACAGLIA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The fact that ostinato forms demand an essentially contrapuntal type of treatment is one possible reason for them falling into disuse after the Baroque period. The classical and romantic composers had a more homophonic approach to composition and contrapuntal treatment was used primarily as a means of textual contrast and development.

It is interesting, therefore, that the contrapuntal approach to composition during the early twentieth century brought with it a revival of the ostinato type of variation.

In this regard, Leon Stein echoes an opinion of Curt Sachs:

> What significance is to be found in the fact that it is in the past three decades that the revival of the passacaglia has occurred? In the answer to this question we find an interesting corroboration of the hypothesis suggested by Curt Sachs in 'The Commonwealth of Art', where the terms "ethos" and "pathos" are used to designate the two basic contrasting types of expression corresponding roughly to the antinomies of objective-subjective, or classic-romantic. The pathos types invariably follow the ethos types, in both smaller and larger cyclic patterns. Thus in the same period, for example, the classic, the earlier phase (Haydn) tends towards the ethos, the later (Beethoven) towards the pathos type. In the pathos music, ... there is a greater relative proportion of lower and bass-line melody. Therefore, it is of interest to note that the revival of the passacaglia occurs during the second quarter of the twentieth century, when experimental, motoric and anti-romantic music gradually yield to a more expressive use of the devices established in the early decades of the century. The passacaglia, developing within this phase, as a bass-melody form, offers a further corroboration of the Sachs theory.[1]

---

[1] L. Stein, "The Passacaglia in the Twentieth Century," *Music and Letters*, 40, No. 2 (1959), p. 153.

2. POSSIBLE REASONS FOR BRITTEN'S USE OF THE PASSACAGLIA

2.1 FREEDOM WITHIN CLEARLY DEFINED LIMITS

The passacaglia form presents a very strong constructional principle. On the one hand, it allows for constant repetition, while on the other hand, it demands constant variation. The possibilities for contrast depend for the most part on the changes which occur in the accompanying materials. This contrast is essential in view of the unwavering repetition of the ostinato.

The passacaglia, therefore, allows for tremendous freedom, which, nevertheless, is contained within clearly defined limit , so that the possibility of the freedom degenerating into formlessness is obviated. The tonal and rhythmic stability of the passacaglia theme impart a unity, cohesion and symmetry to the overall form.

2.2 LINK WITH TRADITION

As a neo-classical composer, Britten tended to work within the context of traditional forms which he imbued with a new life.

T.S. Eliot has commented on tradition and the artist as follows:

> There is ... something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position. A common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously: it must be admitted that the union is mainly unconscious. Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community. And, as our instincts of tidiness imperatively command us not to leave to the haphazard of unconsciousness what we can attempt to do consciously, we are forced to conclude that what happens unconsciously we could bring about, and form into a purpose, if we made a conscious attempt. The second-rate artist, of course, cannot afford to surrender himself to any common action; for his chief task is the assertion of all the trifling differences which are his distinction; only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to elaborate, to exchange, to contribute. [2]

---

[2] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 2nd ed. (1934; rpt. London: Faber, 1980), p. 24.

Britten himself has commented on his awareness of tradition:

> I can only work really because of the tradition I am conscious of behind me. ... I cannot understand why one should *want* to reject the past. ... I am given *strength* by that tradition. I know it changes — of course traditions change. But the human being remains curiously the same. [3]

2.3 NEED FOR UNITY AND COHESION

During the nineteenth century, the internal formal divisions were not always clearly defined. While great variety in the length of period was common in the Classical style, nevertheless the beginning and, in particular, the end of these periods was always clearly defined by the harmony as well as the rhythm and melody.

During the nineteenth century the use of expanded tonality with frequent modulation and chromaticism, combined with the principle of continuous development and transformation of all musical dimensions led to a weakening of the internal formal divisions. Consequently, music tended to develop into a continuous stream (based on all the possibilities of fully chromatic harmony), and the demarcation of the period or phrase endings became more and more elusive. This approach to composition led to a weakening of the internal formal divisions.

In the twentieth century, one of the greatest problems confronting atonal composers was the lack of cohesion within these works which necessitated an extreme brevity of length.

While Britten is not an atonal composer by any means, nevertheless, his use of an expanded tonality results in a weakening of the tonal force. While the tonality may be evident on paper, it may nevertheless elude the listener. Thus, while his music is tonally orientated, nevertheless, it is desirable that at important structural points of a work the tonality be clearly defined.

The advantage of the passacaglia is that it provides the composer with almost unlimited freedom while at the same time providing cohesion through the constant repetition of a tonal impulse in the ostinato. This freedom allows the accompaniment to take off in an infinitude of different directions.

---

[3] C. Palmer, ed., *The Britten Companion* (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 95-96.

Furthermore, the inevitability of the repetitions of the ostinato generates tremendous tension, and this makes the passacaglia a particularly suitable form for use as the climactic or final movement of a multimovement work. Not only does the constant reiteration of a particular tonal orientation establish a tonal centre very forcibly, but the passacaglia also allows for the return of previously-used material both in the ostinato and the accompaniment, so that it can serve to draw together the most salient threads of the work as a whole.

During the Baroque period, the ostinato variations were generally individual self-contained pieces. Britten has used the passacaglia usually as part of a multimovement work where it functions as a confirming or stabilizing factor. The stability (tonal, structural, rhythmic, thematic) inherent in the passacaglia is unrivalled by any other musical form.

2.4 ACCESSIBILITY TO THE LISTENER

Throughout his life, Britten showed tremendous awareness of the need to communicate with the listener.

> I don't always follow the new directions, and nor do I always approve of them, but that is only purely personal to me. ... I sometimes feel that seeking after a new language has become more important than saying what you mean. I mean, I always believe that language is a means and not an end. ... I mean, why bother to write your music down if you don't want to communicate it?[4]

His great fondness of the variation form in general, and of the passacaglia in particular, is possibly a result of his awareness of the need for accessibility to the average listener.

The passacaglia form, with its constant reiteration of a melodic ostinato, provides the listener with a thread by means of which he is guided through the myriad of variations in the accompanying material. It provides a balance between repetition and variety.

3. TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO PASSACAGLIA

Britten's approach to the passacaglia form is based on the textbook definitions of the passacaglia around 1900. His passacaglias are based

---

[4] Palmer, p. 94.

on a melodic ostinato which is adhered to fairly strictly throughout. The importance and variety of the material which he unfolds above the ostinato make any pronounced variation of the ostinato theme itself unnecessary.

In only two passacaglias, those from the Violin Concerto and *The Turn of the Screw* does Britten adopt a slightly freer approach which, nevertheless, remains within the bounds of the traditional passacaglia.

In the Violin Concerto, which is Britten's first excursion into the passacaglia form, while the contour of the ostinato theme remains constant, the rhythmic structure is not strict and undergoes constant variation, and the ostinato theme itself is frequently expanded so that the length of the ostinato theme is flexible.

This less strict approach to the passacaglia form could possibly be explained by the fact that, at this comparatively early stage of his compositional career, Britten may have found the strict passacaglia form too restrictive, that he was unable to work within such clearly defined limits. Quite apart from this, however, the foreground position of the ostinato theme throughout most of this passacaglia necessitates a certain deviation from the monotony of its strict repetition.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, Britten starts out with a basic ostinato theme consisting of six pitches. During the course of the passacaglia the theme is expanded to include all twelve pitches of the theme for variations given out at the beginning of the opera. This is, therefore, another example of the extension of the ostinato theme, but this time, in clearly defined stages which symbolize the gradual tightening of the screw as the opera draws to its climax. Once again, the rhythmic structure of the ostinato is subjected to constant variation.

This idea of altering the rhythmic structure of the ostinato theme can be traced back to Bach and Handel who, however, retained the overall length of the theme intact. The rhythmic alterations to which Britten has subjected the ostinato theme in the Violin Concerto and *The Turn of the Screw*, however, do not presuppose an unchanging theme length.

4. GENRE

In contrast to the Baroque period when the vast majority of passacaglias were keyboard works, Britten has not confined his passacaglias to any particular genre. His passacaglia movements occur in his vocal works, operas, orchestral and chamber works.

5. DEATH-RELATED PASSACAGLIAS

An interesting feature of the passacaglias in the vocal works is that they are all associated with death, functioning either as a threnody, a foreboding of imminent death, or as a meditation on death.

This association of the form of the passacaglia with grief goes back to the time of Monteverdi (1567-1643) when it became the traditional form of *lamentos*.

While extended dramatic recitative *lamentos*, as exemplified by Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna* (1608) were in vogue until nearly the middle of the seventeenth century, at the same time a significant development in the treatment of *lamentos* was heralded in Monteverdi's *Lamento della ninfa* from his eighth book of madrigals (1638). This *lamento* was constructed over the descending tetrachord passacaglia bass.

According to E. Rosand "... its full exploitation of the affective implications of the pattern asserted a relationship between tetrachord and lament that soon became fundamental to the genre". [5]

In the Venetian opera repertory of the 1640s there was a definite association between the tetrachord basso ostinato and the *lamento*. This is confirmed in Cavalli's operas which represent the most comprehensive surviving musical documentation of Venetian opera from 1640-1660. In his earliest *lamentos* Cavalli adopted a recitative setting. However after the lament of Apollo in *Gli amori di Apollo e di Daphne* (1640) which was partly a recitative setting and partly based on a descending tetrachord basso ostinato, Cavalli used the descending tetrachord bass in all his *lamentos*. These *lamentos* were usually placed at the dramatic highpoint of the opera, and were characterized by slow tempo and triple metre.

---

[5] E. Rosand, "Lamento", *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), Vol. X, p. 413.

Lamentos based either entirely or in part on the descending tetrachord also occur in collections of arias and cantatas from 1640 onwards by composers such as Rossi, Carissimi and Cesti.

Lament arias on a tetrachord basso ostinato remained popular in operas, oratorios and cantatas of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and *The Fairy Queen*, for example, both have laments based on a descending chromatic tetrachord. Handel too has used similar lament arias in his operas, for example, in *Orlando* (1733). The most frequent position for these lament arias within the overall framework of the opera was at the dramatic highpoint of the opera immediately prior to the resolution of the plot.

Perhaps the most famous example of a lament is the opening chorus from J.S. Bach's Cantata BWV 12, *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (1714) which is based on a descending chromatic tetrachord. This same movement, with a different text, was subsequently used by Bach as the "Crucifixus" in his Mass in B. Minor, BWV 232 in the late 1740's.

Britten's death-related passacaglias also frequently occur at the dramatic climax of the work, for example, the "Dirge" from the *Serenade*, "Death, be not proud!" from *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, *Peter Grimes*, *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Noye's Fludde* and the "Agnus Dei".

In the passacaglias under study, the following occur in direct association with death:

- "Dirge" from the *Serenad*
- "Death, be not proud!" from *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*
- *The Rape of Lucretia*
- *Albert Herring*
- *The Turn of the Screw*
- *Noye's Fludde*
- "Agnus Dei" from the *War Requiem*.

In both *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd* the passacaglia movement is a forewarning of imminent death. In these instances the relentless repetition of the ostinato is symbolic of the inevitability of death. In *Peter Grimes* the passacaglia movement, situated as it is in a central position of the work as a whole, marks the turning point of the opera after which Grimes's journey to self destruction becomes

inevitable. The passacaglia from *Billy Budd* is also situated in a central position and foreshadows the inevitability of Billy's ultimate destruction by Claggart.

In *Noye's Fludde* the passacaglia movement represents the rising waters of the flood at the highpoint of the work as a whole. Here the passacaglia mourns not only the loss of life through the flood, but also the dying to an old consciousness by those who survived the flood.

In view of the explicit relationship of the passacaglia of the String Quartet no. 3 to the opera *Death in Venice*, Op. 38, 1973, through the passacaglia's subtitle "La Serenissima", Peter Evans sees this movement as a threnody both for the composer himself and for Aschenbach, the central figure of *Death in Venice*.[6] As this String Quartet was written in Venice, the passacaglia can also be construed as lamenting the decay of the city of Venice.

In the true neo-classical spirit, Britten has worked within the framework of the passacaglia in its role as a lament.

An interesting feature of these death-related passacaglias is that the ostinato theme itself is frequently based on highly significant thematic material.

In *Peter Grimes*, for instance, the ostinato is based on the Grimes motive which is central to the entire opera. The use of this particular motive as the ostinato of the passacaglia could be a forewarning to Grimes that his ultimate destruction will be self-inflicted.

In *The Rape of Lucretia*, the ostinato is fittingly a combination of both Tarquinius's motive (the element of destruction) and Lucretia's motive (the destroyed).

The passacaglia in *Billy Budd* which is a forewarning to Billy of the inevitability of his destruction by Claggart, has an ostinato theme which is based directly on Claggart's motive.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PASSACAGLIA FORM

6.1 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE OSTINATO THEME

Britten has thrown off the Baroque characteristics of four or eight-

---

[6] Evans, p. 347.

measure ostinato themes, slow triple metre, trochaic rhythmic pattern and the tetrachord influence.

He has used a wide variety of theme lengths ranging from two measures to twenty six measures. He also rarely uses the favoured triple metre of the Baroque, and has abandoned completely the Baroque preference for trochaic rhythm.

An interesting rhythmic innovation occurs in *Peter Grimes* where the ostinato occurs one beat earlier in the measure on each repetition so that the rhythm is imbued with tremendous vitality and the repetitions of the ostinato are grouped into larger units of four statements each.

While the tritone is prominent in many of these themes, there is no evidence of the influence of the tetrachord.

6.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TYPE OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

During the Baroque period, the passacaglia was essentially a monothematic form in which the ostinato, functioning as the theme, was subjected to various settings above it. Britten's contrapuntal ingenuity, however, allows the ostinato to function merely as a foundation which supports other themes or structures above it. This use of multiple themes represents a radical departure from the monothematic practice of earlier passacaglia composers.

> His method of featuring, against the ground, contrasting thematic material of equal importance, and maintaining with masterly skill a fluctuating polarity between the two, are what give his passacaglias their remarkable expressive force and vitality, and almost certainly arise from the intuitive sense of drama that has made him one of the foremost opera composers of our time. [7]

6.2.1 Combination of continuous variations with theme and variations

The ostinatos of the passacaglias from both *Peter Grimes* and the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra* both support a theme with variations in the accompaniment.

In *Peter Grimes* the theme on which the variations are based has certain resemblances to the ostinato itself. Nevertheless, this theme and the subsequent variations on it successfully divert attention from

---

[7] D. Handel, "Britten's Use of the Passacaglia," *Tempo*, 94 (1970), p. 6.

the ostinato, so that its discreet presence functions as a rhythmic and harmonic support and a tonal anchor.

In the *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, the theme on which the variations in the accompaniment are based forms a strong contrast to the ostinato. Here again, Britten's contrapuntal ingenuity has enabled him to build a complex formal structure above the ostinato.

6.2.2 Combination of passacaglia and fugue

While during the Baroque period, the passacaglia was frequently followed by a fugue, nevertheless in the *combination* of these two forms in the "Dirge" from the *Serenade*, Britten has created a hybrid crossing between the passacaglia and the fugue, which is probably unique in the passacaglia literature of the twentieth century. The ostinato theme and the fugue subject bear no relationship to each other.

6.2.3 Combination of passacaglia and canon

In the central portion of the passacaglia from *The Rape of Lucretia* the ostinato supports a four part canon which is based on the ostinato theme itself, but which nevertheless is handled in such a way that it diverts attention from the constantly reiterated ostinato. This illustrates not only Britten's highly imaginative contrapuntal skill, but also the economy of resources with which he was able to work.

6.2.4 Combination of melodic and harmonic ostinato variation

The passacaglia in *Albert Herring* represents a unique combination of the melodic and harmonic types of ostinato variation. Here Britten combines an unchanging melodic bass line with a constant succession of chords above it. He has thus combined the harmonic type of ostinato variation, which does not presuppose an unchanging bass line with a strict melodic ostinato.

6.2.5 Use of multiple themes

The accompaniment of the passacaglia from the String Quartet no. 3 is based on two contrasting themes which occur in an ABA pattern.

6.2.6 Shift of emphasis

Britten's contrapuntal skill has caused a shift of emphasis in the passacaglia from a vehicle for virtuosic display on the part of the performer during the Baroque period, to a vehicle for the display of contrapuntal ingenuity on the part of the composer. The listener, however, remains unaware of this contrapuntal virtuosity and responds only to the spirit and the magic of the music itself.

7. POSITION WITHIN THE OVERALL FRAMEWORK

Britten has used his passacaglia movements both in a central and a final or near-final position. When used in a central position his passacaglias [illegible]s a point of tonal and rhythmic stability within the overall [illegible]. In a final position, on the other hand, they serve to confi[illegible]al centre and thematic material.

8. BRITTEN'S ACHIEVEMENT

In the passacaglias under study, Britten has demonstrated dramatically that the traditional means of musical expression are not outdated and exhausted. He has been capable of renewing old procedures in writing music which is understandable, relevant and meaningful to the present-day society. His achievement is well summarized by Robin Holloway:

> This music has the power to connect the avantgarde with the lost paradise of tonality; it conserves and renovates in the boldest and simplest manner; it shows how old usages can be refreshed and remade, and how the new can be saved from mere rootlessness, etiolation, lack of connection and communication. [8]

---

[8] R. Holloway, "Benjamin Britten: Tributes and Memories," *Tempo*, 120 (1977), p. 6.

APPENDIX A

THE PASSACAGLIA PRIOR TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

1. SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

1.1 ORIGIN OF TERM [1]

The passacaglia was first documented in Spain. In Spanish, its name is *pasacalle* from *pasar*, to walk, and *calle*, street. [2] The earliest known literary mention of the word is in an anonymous prose work *Pícara Justina* (1605).

1.2 EARLY SOURCES

The *Nuova inventione d'intavolatura* (1606) of Girolamo Montesardo was the first Italian tablature for the Spanish guitar. [3] It contains the first extant example of a passacaglia. At the beginning of his book, Montesardo provides a long series of *passacaglie* on all the letters of the guitar's chord alphabet. For each tonality, that is, letter, he provided two *passacaglie*, consisting of simple patterns on I-IV-V-I, and which differ only in the rhythmic position of the harmonies.

Thus, here, the passacaglia is a short piece in chordal style, usually two to four measures in triple metre and in either major or minor key. [4]

Example 1(a) on p. 282 shows Montesardo's first example for the key of G major, indicated in the Italian tablature by the

---

[1] In view of the fact that Britten's use of the passacaglia was a conscious revival of an historical form, I deem it necessary to trace the origin and history of the passacaglia.

[2] In Italy during the first half of the seventeenth century a masculine noun was usually used: *passacaglio* in the singular, *passacagli* in the plural. Subsequently, feminine endings became more common, thus *passacaglia* in the singular, *passacaglie* in the plural.

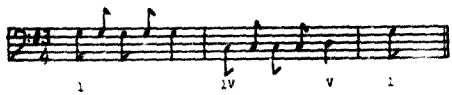
[3] Quoted in T. Walker, "Ciaccona and Passacaglia." *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 21 (1968), pp. 305-306.

[4] Walker, p. 306.

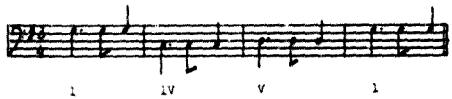
letter A. His second example for each key has a different rhythm (see Ex. 1(b) below).

Ex. 1: G. Montesardo, *Nuova inventione d'intavolatura* [5] (downward stems indicate downward strokes; upward stems indicate upward strokes on the guitar)

a) "Prima passacaglie, o ritornello del primo modo sopra la lettera, A"



b) "Del secondo modo"



This sequence of harmonic steps (I-IV-V-I) in triple metre remained characteristic of the early passacaglia.

Almost every reference which Montesardo made to these formulae was phrased in some such way as "Passacaglie overo ritornelli" (*passacaglie* or *ritornelli*). [6] The association of these two terms brings one to the conclusion that, to Montesardo, the elemental *passacaglie* were no pieces in themselves, but were outlines for improvization for instrumental preludes, interludes or postludes in arias and dances, and also in instrumental stage music as accompaniment for entries. This seems to be the only feasible explanation for the inclusion of a passacaglia for every tonality, a procedure which does not occur with any other piece in the book.

Other interesting examples of passacaglias which functioned as *ritornelli* occur in L. de Briceño's *Método mui facilíssimo* (Paris, 1626),

---

[5] Quoted in R. Hudson, "The Passacaglia and Ciaccona in Italian Keyboard Music of the 17th Century: Part 1," *The Diapason*, 60, No. 12 (1969), p. 23.

[6] Hudson, "Part 1," p. 23.

B. Sanseverino's *Il Primo libro d'intavolatura per la chitarra alla spagnuola* (Milan, 1622) and G. Sanz's *Instrucción de música sobre la guitarra española* (Saragossa, 1674).[7]

Thus, it would seem that at least until after 1625, the word passacaglia could be used as a synonym for *ritornello*, and that it in fact had no other meaning in the printed sources of the time.

Furthermore, according to Von Fischer, it is in this light of functioning as a *ritornello* that the passacaglias found in the operas of Monteverdi and the Venetian composers must be understood. Sometimes in these operas the composer, demands a *ritornello* without writing anything in notation, but simply indicating "Passacaglio".[8]

As was the case with other *ritornello* forms such as the sixteenth-century *ripresa* where the basic harmonic progression was repeated sometimes as many as twenty times, it seems feasible that the single I-IV-V-I phrases contained in the alphabet series guitar books were intended to be repeated several times. Thus, the principle of ostinato repetition of a single short harmonic phrase would already have been present in the early passacaglia.

1.3 THE CHACONNE

The chaconne originated as a dance-song in Latin America and became popular in Spain early in the seventeenth century.[9] About 1600 it replaced the *zarabanda* as the most popular dance in Spain. It was a lively and, by all accounts, a rather obscene dance, and was accompanied by the Spanish guitar, percussion instruments, such as the castanets and tambourines, as well as a sung text with refrain.

During the first quarter of the seventeenth century, the Spanish guitar was played in an exclusively strummed or chordal style, and the most frequently used harmonic formula for the chaconne was I-V-vi-V.

---

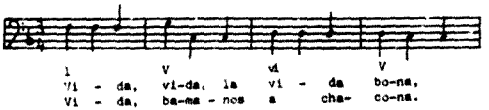
[7] Quoted in Walker, p. 307-309.

[8] K. von Fischer, 'Passacaglia," *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. F. Blume, Vol. X (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1962), col. 871.

[9] In Spanish, the spelling is *chacona* in the singular, and *chaconas* in the plural. In Italian, the spelling is *ciaconna* in the singular, and *ciaccone* in the plural.

This formula was spread over four measures and in Italy this four measure phrase of chords was apparently repeated as an ostinato for every line of the text. The guitar chaconnes were almost all in triple metre and in the major key.

Ex. 2: Early harmonic pattern of the chaconne with guitar chords and refrain text (the stems indicate the direction in executing the stroke) [10]



The melody to which the text was sung seems to have been lost.

The earliest published passacaglias and chaconnes therefore had different functions. The passacaglias functioned as *ritornelli*, with the harmonic progression I-IV-V-I spread over two, three or four measures in various rhythmic arrangements. This harmonic framework served as a basis for improvization for preludes, interludes and postludes in both major and minor keys.

The chaconnes, on the other hand, were dance-songs based on the harmonic formula I-V-vi-V, and occasionally I-V-IV-V or I-V-ii-V. The chaconne phrase was confined to the major key, to triple metre and to a fairly fixed rhythmic structure with accented second beat.

1.4 THE BAROQUE VARIATION PASSACAGLIA AND CHACONNE

From the early elemental passacaglias in which the harmonic phrase I-IV-V-I was used as the basis for improvization, it was only a matter of time before composers realized its obvious potential as a basis for variations.

As a basis of construction in variation forms, the harmonic formula had two possibilities: either the chordal structure could be retained as the basis of the variations, or the gaps between the bass notes of the chords could be filled in melodically to form a melodic ostinato.

---

[10] Quoted in Hudson, "Part 1," p. 23.

Both these possibilities were applied when, in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, the harmonic formulae of the passacaglia and chaconne began to form the basis of variation forms for guitar, voice and continuo, keyboard instruments and various continuo chamber groups.

1.4.1 The early theorists

The Baroque theorists who are known to have commented on the passacaglia and chaconne were unable to arrive at a clear distinction between the two forms, as it appears that the terms were used rather loosely, indiscriminately and interchangeably during this period.

S. de Brossard probably based his definition in 1703 on his experience of French opera and the clavecin pieces of the time:

> PASSACAGLIO, veut dire, PASSACAILLE. C'est proprement une *Chacone*. Voyez, CIACONA. Toute la différence est que le *mouvement* en est ordinairement plus *grave* que celuy de la *Chacone*, le Chant *plus tendre*, & les expressions *moins vifves*, c'est pour cela que les *Passacailles* sont presque toûjours travaillées sur des *Modes mineurs*, c'est à dire, dont la *Médiante* n'est éloignée de la Finalle que d'une 3° mineure.
>
> (Passacaglio means passacaille, and that is in reality a chaconne. (See chaconne.) The only difference lies in the fact that the movement of the Passacailles is usually slower than that of the chaconne, and the melody more tender and the expression less lively. For this reason the passacailles are almost always written in minor modes, that is, the mode of which the mediant is a minor third above the final.) [11]

J.G. Walther's description in 1732 seems to have been based on that of Brossard:

> Passacaglio oder Passagaglio (ital.) Passacaille (gall.) ist eigentlich eine Chaconne. Der gantze Unterscheid bestehet darinn, dass sie ordinairement langsamer als die Chaconne gehet, die Melodie matthertziger (zärtlicher), und die Expression nicht so lebhafft ist; und eben deswegen werden die Passacaillen fast allezeit in den Modis minoribus, d.i. in solchen Tonen gesetzt, die eine weiche Tertz haben. s. Bross. Diction. Nach dem Dictionaire Etymologique des Mènage ist es eigentlich ein Spanischer Terminus, der, sint der Zeit die Opern in Franckreich aufgekommen, in die Frantzösische Sprache eingeführet worden ist, und so viel als Passe-ruë, einen Gassenhauer, ein Gassen-Lied bedeutet.

---

[11] S. de Brossard, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Paris, 1703; rpt. Amsterdam: Antiqua, 1964), sig. U3[v]. Translation by P.C. Stroux.

> (Passacaglio or passagaglio (Ital.), passacaille (French) is really a chaconne. The whole difference consists in that the passacaglia is usually slower than the chaconne, the melody more tender and the expression not as lively and for this reason the passacaglia is always in minor keys, that is, keys with a minor third. (See Brossard.) According to the *Dictionaire Etymologique* by Ménage, the word is in reality a Spanish term which has been introduced in France and it means the same as Passe-rue which means a street song.) [12]

The theorist J. Mattheson in 1739 also commented on the passacaglia:

> ... the distinction between the chaconne and the passacaille consists in four things which one cannot easily ignore. These four characteristics are the following: That the chaconne proceeds more deliberately and slowly than the passacaille, not the other way around; that the former prefers the major keys, while the latter prefers the minor; that the passacaille is never used in singing, like the chaconne, but only for dancing, hence naturally has a quicker movement; and finally, that the chaconne has a constant bass theme, which, though one occasionally deviates from it for variation and from fatigue, soon reappears and maintains its position; while on the other hand the passacaille is restricted to no definite subject, and retains almost nothing else of the chaconne than the mere *Mouvement*, though somewhat accelerated. For these reasons one has good cause to give the passacaille preference over the chaconne. [13]

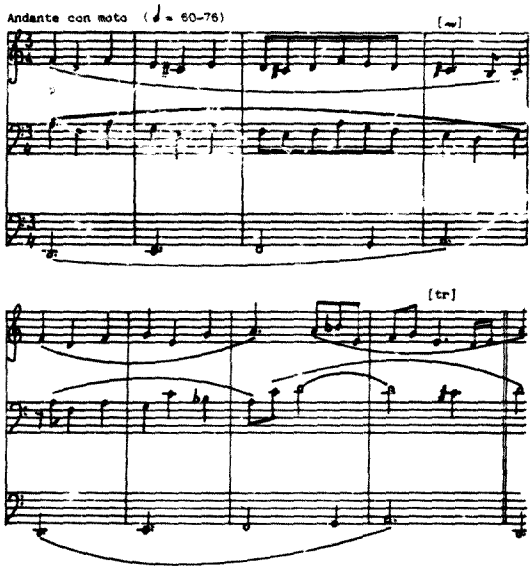
Mattheson is of the opinion that the passacaglia has no definite subject, but that the chaconne has "a constant bass theme". While no other theorist of the time seems to have shared his view, chaconnes and passacaglias can be found which give credence to this viewpoint. One example is the Chaconne in D minor for organ by J. Pachelbel (1653-1706).

---

[12] J.G. Walther, *Musikalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732; rpt. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1953), pp. 464-465. Translation by P.C. Stroux.

[13] J. Mattheson, *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg: 1739), trans. E.C. Harriss (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), pp. 465-466.

Ex. 3: J. Pachelbel, Ciacona in D minor,[14] mm. 1-9

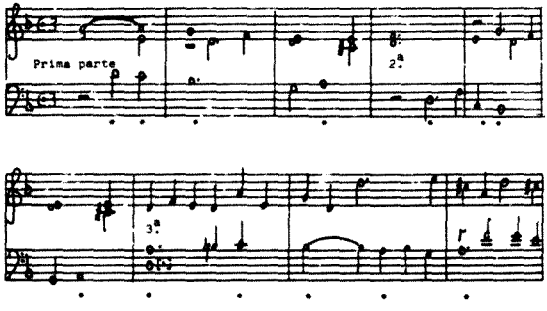


As an exa[illegible]f a passacaglia with no definite bass theme, one may cite the P[illegible]a sopra Passacagli from *Il Secondo Libro di Toccate* (1627) of G. Frescobaldi (1583-1643).

---

[14] J. Pachelbel, Ciacona in D minor, in J. Pachelbel, *Selected Organ Works*, Vol. 1, ed. K. Matthaei, 4th ed. (Basel: Bärenreiter, n.d.), p. 46.

Ex. 4: G. Frescobaldi, Partite sopra Passacagli, [15] mm. 1-9
(notes forming part of the descending tetrachord are marked *)



On closer examination, however, it is evident that, while there is no strict basso ostinato, the ascending or descending diatonic tetrachord is the unifying factor. At any given point in the work, the diatonic tetrachord is present, usually in its descending form, but occasionally in its ascending form. On occasions it is considerably disguised, while at other times it is fairly obvious. Mattheson may have considered such a piece to be without a theme.

The passacaille-rondeaux of the French composers, where much of the material which occurs between the rondeau theme appearances could be regarded as "themeless", might also have been in Mattheson's mind. An example of such a work is the Passacaglia in G minor for organ by Georg Muffat (1653-1704). [16]

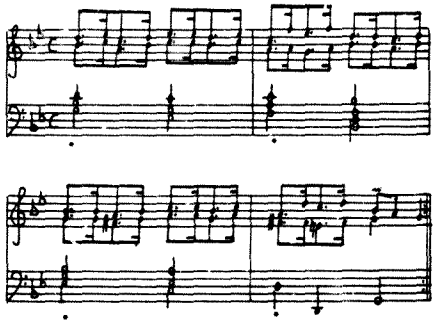
Matheson might also have regarded a chordal progression as being without a theme, as in the following Passacaglia in G minor by G.F. Handel.

---

[15] G. Frescobaldi, Partite sopra Passacagli, from *Il Secondo Libro di Toccate, Canzone, ... di cimbalo et organo di Girolamo Frescobaldi* (1627), in *Corpus of Early Keyboard Music*, Vol. XXX, ed. W.R. Shindle (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1968), p. 46.

[16] G. Muffat, Passacaglia, in *Historical Anthology of Music*, Vol. II, eds. A.T. Davison and W. Apel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 113.

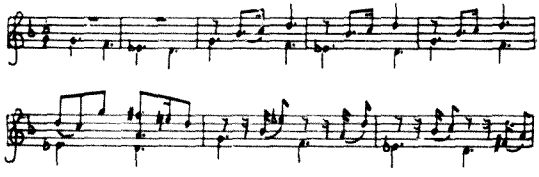
Ex. 5: G.F. Handel, Passacaille from Suite no. 7, [17] mm. 1-4
(notes marked * form part of the descending tetrachord)



However, in this example, the descending tetrachord is clearly evident.

On the other hand an equally strong case can be made for the argument that a passacaglia does have a definite theme. An example of such a Passacaglia is that for violin solo in G minor by H.I.F. Biber (1644-1704).

Ex. 6: H.I.F. Biber, Passacaglia for Violin Solo, [18] mm. 1-8



---

[17] G.F. Handel, Passacaille from Suite no. 7, in G.F. Handel, *Klavierwerke 1*, ed. R. Steglich (Kassel: Bärenreiter), 1955, p. 69.

[18] H.I.F. Biber, Passacaglia for Violin Solo, in K. von Fischer, *The Variation* (Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag, 1962), p. 71.

From an examination of the passacaglias and chaconnes of Mattheson's time, it is evident that the composers had a great variety of approach to these two forms, and often used the terms indiscriminately.

1.4.2 Later definitions

Jean Jacques Rousseau's comments on the passacaglia in 1768, seem to be based on Brossard's dictionary of 1703:

> PASSACAILLE. s.f. Espèce de Chaconne dont le Chant est plus tendre & le mouvement plus lent que dans les Chaconnes ordinaires. (Voyez Chaconne.) Les Passacailles d'Armide & d'Issé sont célèbres dans l'Opéra François.
>
> (Passacaille, noun, female. A type of chaconne of which the melody is more tender and the movement more slow than in the normal chaconne. (See Chaconne.) The passacailles from Armide and Issé are famous in French opera.) [19]

Since the time of Brossard's definition in 1703, theorists (with the exception of Mattheson) seem to have accepted the difference in mood and tempo between the passacaglia and the chaconne.

A.F.C. Kollmann, writing in 1799, has the following definition of the passacaglia:

> The passacaille is written in $\frac{3}{4}$, and begins with the third crotchet. Its movement is moderate, and its character a serious tenderness. It generally consists but of one section of eight bars, to which variations are made. Sultzer mentions those in the operas *Armide* and *Issé* as celebrated in France; and one written in common time, which begins with the full bar, and consequently deviates from the above description in two particulars, see in Handel's Suites, Vol. 1, Suite 7. [20]

Of the eighteenth-century theorists cited, Mattheson is the only one who considers that the passacaglia does not have a basso ostinato.

---

[19] J.J. Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Paris, 1768; rpt. New York: Johnson Corporation, 1969), p. 366. Translation by P.C. Stroux.

[20] A.F.C. Kollmann, *An Essay on Practical Music Composition* (London, 1799; rpt. New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), p. 105.

1.4.3 More recent research

1.4.3.1 Hudson

Interesting new research on the Baroque passacaglia and chaconne has been undertaken by R. Hudson and is incorporated in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. [21]

According to Hudson, the original I-IV-V-I harmonic formula of the passacaglia and the I-V-vi-V harmonic formula (and the less frequently used I-V-IV-V and I-V-ii-V formulae) of the chaconne were gradually expanded melodically.

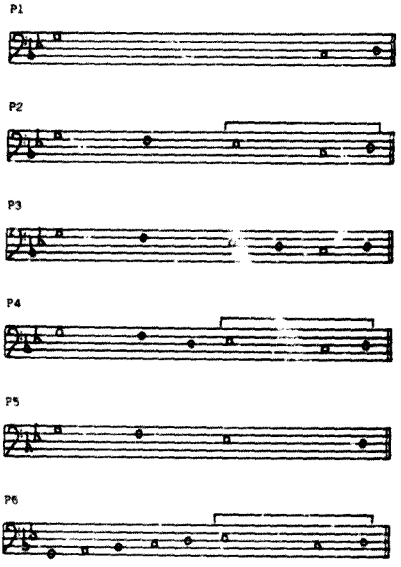
These formulae had developed in chordal guitar music. However, in the second quarter of the seventeenth century in *punteado* [22] style guitar music and in keyboard music, a linear influence was exerted on the chordal formulae, and the leaps in the original root progressions were filled in melodically. Two sets of formulae developed, one set for the passacaglia, and one set for the chaconne, and these formulae are the principal means of distinguishing the two forms.

---

[21] R. Hudson, "Passacaglia," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. S. Sadie (London: MacMillan, 1980), Vol. XIV, pp. 267-270.

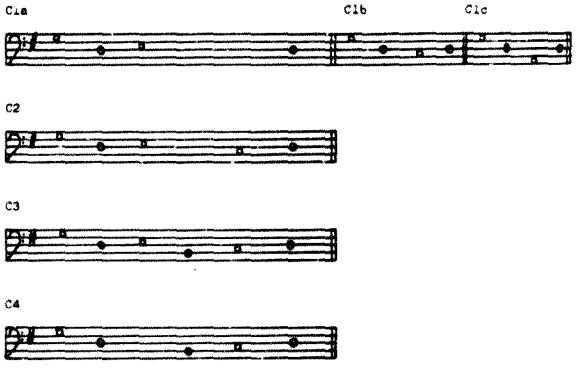
[22] The playing of selected notes on separate courses of the guitar.

Ex. 7: The principal passacaglia formulae (usually minor) [23]

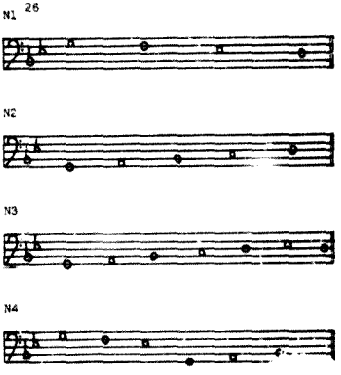


[23] Hudson, "Passacaglia," p. 268.

Ex. 8: The principal chaconne formulae (usually major) [24]



Ex. 9: Neutral formulae (major and minor) [25]



[24] Hudson, "Part 1," p. [illegible]

[25] Hudson, "Part 1," p. 23.

[26] In his article "Passacaglia" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* Hudson includes this formula under those belonging to the passacaglia.

According to Hudson, while the most favoured chaconne formula was I-V-vi-V, the formulae I-V-IV-V and I-V-ii-V were also used. These latter two formulae are shown as C1b and C1c in Ex. 8, p. 293. The neutral forms, shown in Ex. 9, p. 293, could be used in either passacaglias or chaconnes.

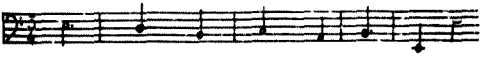
In Italy, the process of composition involved either choosing a different melodic formula for each phrase of the piece, or restricting oneself to one particular formula for the entire piece. According to Hudson, guitar pieces after about 1640 as well as keyboard music were predominantly based on a changing polythematic bass line. In vocal music, however, composers tended to favour the use of one specific formula throughout, resulting in a basso ostinato. While a basso ostinato is one possible use of these formulae, it is, nevertheless, a highly restricted use.

Thus, according to Hudson, the Italian passacaglia variations were usually in triple metre, in a minor key, and were based on the concept of continual variation. In the case of a polythematic bass, this variation involved all the voices, while in the case of a basso ostinato only the upper voices were involved in the variation.

In France, the variation passacaglia appeared around the mid-seventeenth century. It was frequently found in instrumental dance music, and was influenced by the French interest in sectional form. According to Hudson, most of the French solo and orchestral passacaglias retained the characteristics of minor mode, triple metre, and formulae which differ from those of the chaconne. As in Italy, there was no distinguishing rhythmic characteristic between the two forms.

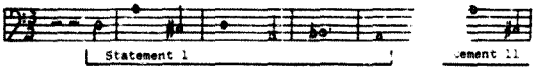
Hudson admits to a rather confusing picture in Germany due to both the Italian and French influence. He finds that the German organ chaconnes and passacaglias tended to favour a basso ostinato. However, in Germany the use of the two terms is rather contradictory, for example, the Chaconne in E minor for organ by D. Buxtehude (c. 1637-1707) is built on formula P5.

Ex. 10: Bass formula of D. Buxtehude, Ciacona in E minor [27] :
P5: 8-7-(5)-6-(4)-5-(3)



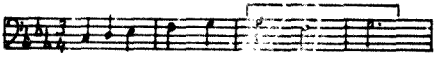
Buxtehude's Passacaglia in D minor for organ, on the other hand, would appear to be based on the chaconne formula C1a.

Ex. 11: Bass formula of D. Buxtehude, Passacaglio in D minor [28] :
C1a: 8-5-(7-8-5)-6-5



Hudson sees the bass theme of Bach's C minor Passacaglia for organ, BWV 582 as being derived from the P6 formula. Bach ends the first phrase with the 6-4-5 ending of this formula and precedes it by the same motive one degree lower (5-3-4). In the second phrase, the 6-4-5 motive is treated sequentially and the interval of a third is expanded to a fourth (3-7-1).

Ex. 12: Passacaglia formula

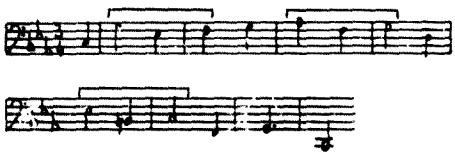


---

[27] D. Buxtehude, Ciacona, in D. Buxtehude, *Organ Works*, Vol. 1, eds. P. Spitta and M. Seiffert, 3rd ed., n.d., rpt. with introduction by W. Kraft, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf, [illegible], p. 12.

[28] D. Buxtehude, Passacaglio, in D. Buxtehude, *Organ Works*, Vol. 1, eds. P. Spitta and M. Seiffert, 3rd ed. (n.d., rpt. with introduction by W. Kraft, Wiesbaden: Breitkopf, 1952), p. 1.

Ex. 13: Bass formula of Bach's Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582 [29]



> Some features remain then, even in the Bach work, to remind one of the passacaglia and ciaccona development that began more than 100 years earlier in the guitar book of Girolamo Montesardo. The dance of the ciacona originally possessed a fixed rhythm in triple meter, characterized, as were other guitar forms of the period by second-beat accents. The passacaglia, as a ritornello, had no set rhythm of its own, but when used for variations imitated the triple meter of the ciaccona, and often the second-beat accents. The ciaccona was always in the major mode; the passacaglia ritornello was in either mode. In *partite* the passacaglia gradually tended to favor minor as a contrast to the ciaccona. The principal way, however, in which the two forms were most clearly and consistently differentiated was by the formulae. ... It is a *rhythmic* ostinato in the sense that a short rhythmic length is obstinately repeated. It is a *harmonic* ostinato to the extent that the opening and closing chords of each phrase usually correspond. It is a *basso ostinato* only if the composer wishes it. [30]

From Hudson's research, it would appear that two practices for the composition of the passacaglia and chaconne existed side by side, namely, the use of a monothematic basso ostinato or the use of a polythematic bass line. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is the former practice which has survived.

1.4.3.2 Von Fischer

According to Von Fischer in 1962, there were two types of passacaglias during the Baroque: [31]

---

[29] J.S. Bach, Passacaglia and Fugue, BWV 582, in J.S. Bach, *The Complete Organ Works*, Vol. VII (New York: Kalmus, 1968), p. 39.

[30] R. Hudson, "The Passacaglia and Ciaccona in Italian Keyboard Music of the 17th Century: Part II," *The Diapason*, 61, No. 1 (1969), p. 7.

[31] Von Fischer, col. 872.

- the Italian and Spanish type without a strictly observed basso ostinato; and
- the French type with a more strictly observed basso ostinato.

In Germany, he sees both French and Italian influence at work. Thus, works in which a strict basso ostinato persists would indicate French influence, for example Biber's Passacaglia for solo violin, [32] Buxtehude's Passacaglia for organ, [33] and Bach's Passacaglia for organ. [34]

1.4.3.3 Other theorists

Apel bases his definition on Bach's Passacaglia in C minor for organ, BWV 582, and his Chaconne in D minor for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1004:

> A passacaglia, then, is a continuous variation based on a clearly distinguishable ostinato that normally appears in the bass but that may occasionally be transferred to an upper voice, as in Bach's passacaglia. A chaconne, on the other hand, is a continuous variation in which the "theme" is a scheme of harmonies (e.g. I-VI-IV-V) usually treated so that the first and last chords are fixed whereas the intervening ones can be replaced by substitutes. [35]

This definition is in accordance with that of Goetschius in 1915. [36] Theorists such as Berry, [37] Stein, [38] and Hutcheson [39] agree with Apel's distinction. Green distinguishes between variations on a basso ostinato and variations on a succession of harmonies. [40]

---

[32] Biber, p. 71.

[33] Buxtehude, Passacaglio, p. 1.

[34] Bach, Passacaglia, p. 39.

[35] Apel, p. 141.

[36] Goetschius, pp. 29-40.

[37] Berry, pp. 279-290.

[38] Stein, *Structure and Style*, pp. 142-145.

[39] Hutcheson, pp. 172-195.

[40] Green, pp. 115-123.

1.4.4 Some features of Baroque passacaglias

1.4.4.1 Metre

In general, the Baroque variation passacaglia and chaconne retain the triple metre of the ritornello passacaglia and the dance chaconne. An interesting example of a passacaglia in simple quadruple metre is that from Handel's Suite no. 7 in G minor (see Ex. 5, p. 289).

1.4.4.2 Descending tetrachord bass formula

The most frequently used bass formula for both the passacaglia and the chaconne was that of the descending tetrachord, in its major, minor or chromatic form. This would justify its inclusion under the neutral forms (see Ex. 9, p. 293). Examples of the minor form occur in Biber's Passacaglia for violin solo (see Ex. 6, p. 289) and in the chaconne in G minor by T.A. Vitali (1665- ?).

Ex. 14: Basso ostinato theme from T.A. Vitali, Ciaconna [41]



A frequent variant of the descending tetrachord theme, is that of the ascending tetrachord from tonic to dominant. Variants of both the ascending and descending tetrachords have been used.

In his Passacaglia in G minor, Georg Muffat uses a theme which consists of two statements of the ascending minor tetrachord.

Ex. 15: Basso ostinato theme from G. Muffat, Passacaglia [42]



---

[41] T.A. Vitali, Ciaccona for Violin and Piano (Leipzig: Breitkopf, n.d.), p. 2.

[42] Muffat, p. 113.

Buxtehude in his Chaconne in E minor for organ uses a variant of the descending minor tetrachord.

Ex. 16: Basso ostinato theme from D. Buxtehude, Ciacona in E minor [43]



During the course of the movement he also uses the chromatic form of the descending tetrachord (statements twenty, twenty one and twenty five), as well as the chromatic tetrachord in its ascending form (statements twenty two and twenty three).

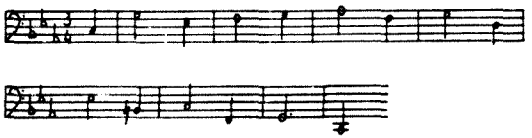
When both the ascending and descending forms of the tetrachord are used in the same composition, such works may perhaps be regarded as being constructed on a single theme and its inversion. The Vitali Chaconne uses both forms of the tetrachord (see Ex. 14, p. 298).

1.4.4.3 Length of theme

The basso ostinato theme is usually short consisting of a single phrase ending on the dominant or a pair of phrases ending on the tonic. Sometimes the theme consists entirely of notes of equal value as in the Vitali Chaconne (see Ex. 14, p. 298).

An interesting feature of some passacaglia themes is that they are constructed on a single rhythmic pattern.

Ex. 17: Basso ostinato theme from J.S. Bach, Passacaglia, BWV 582 [44]



---

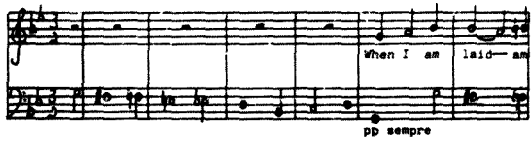
[43] Buxtehude, *Ciacona*, p. 12.

[44] Bach, Passacaglia, p. 39.

1.4.4.4 First statement of the theme

The bass theme is usually announced in an accompanied form; however, interesting exceptions are the themes from Bach's Passacaglia (see Ex. 17, p. 299), and the Lament from H. Purcell's (1659-1695) *Dido and Aeneas*.

Ex. 18: H. Purcell, Lament from *Dido and Aeneas*,[45] III, ii, score number 38



1.4.4.5 Continuity

A most important feature of basso ostinato variations is their continuous structure, in which the variations occur one after the other in an unbroken succession. It is important that the sectional effect created by the constant repetition of the bass theme be offset by continuity in the upper parts, and for this reason, the dominant half cadence with which most basso ostinato themes end is of the greatest importance because of the forward momentum it creates. In themes which lack a dominant ending, such as Bach's Passacaglia, BWV 582, melodic bridging of the repetitions of the ostinato in the accompaniment is the most important means of maintaining continuity.

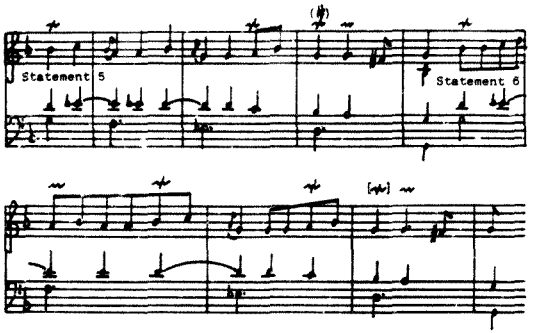
1.4.4.6 Grouping

Within the overall profile of general growth, the variations are sometimes divided into small groups. A still more frequent device is the construction of the second of a pair of variations from the first, as for example, in the Passacaglia in G minor by L. Couperin (1626-1661) where the composer varies one statement by figural embellishment in the next.

---

[45] H. Purcell, *Dido and Aeneas* (Sevenoaks: Novello, 1979), pp. 94-95.

Ex. 19: L. Couperin, Passacaille in G minor,[46] mm. 17-25

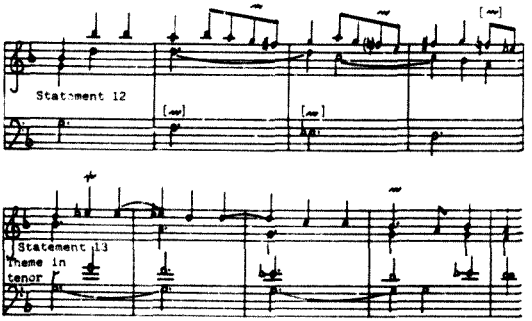


Such groupings give unity and cohesion to the continuous variations.

1.4.4.7 Transposition of theme to anothe

Occasionally the ostinato is transposed to . voice, as for example in the Passacaglia in G minor by L. Couperin.

Ex. 20: L. Couperin, Passacaille,[47] mm. 45-52



---

46 L. Couperin, Passacaille, in L. Couperin, *Pièces de Clavecin*, ed. A. Curtis (Paris: Heugel, n.d.), p. 161.

47 Couperin, p. 162.

Author De Villiers Bernadette
Name of thesis Benjamin Britten's use of the passacaglia. 1985

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.