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Benjamin Britten's use of the passacaglia

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1.4.4.8 Transposition of theme to other tonal centres

Occasionally the bass theme was transposed to other tonal centres. In the Vitali Chaconne, for instance, the bass theme passes through the following keys: g, b^b, f, g, a, g, E^b, e^b, g.[48]

In the Passacaglia in D minor by Buxtehude, the bass theme is also transposed to different tonal levels, namely from d to F and a, and then back to d. The particular tonal centres used outline the tonic triad of D minor, and give tonal cohesion and symmetry to the work.

1.4.4.9 Modifications to the bass theme

Slight modifications to the bass theme are frequent and range from figuration of the theme, to slight rhythmic alterations and sometimes minor changes of contour.

2. NINETEENTH CENTURY

Around 1800, the ostinato type of variation fell into disuse. Nelson is of the opinion that a period of variation decadence set in, and many of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century keyboard variations were rather frivolous and inconsequential works, but he goes on to say:

> Against such minor evidences of triviality and display must be balanced the growing incorporation of variation movements into cyclical forms, the nature of which, on the whole, was distinctly more weighty and serious. Whereas previously the use of variation movements in larger works had been confined to an occasional place in such pieces as dance suites and trio sonatas, in the Viennese classic period they were introduced into the manifold forms of the sonata, symphony, divertimento, quartet, and concerto. These incorporated variations, reflecting no doubt the more serious attitude which composers entertained toward the larger forms, have greater musical depth and interest than the independent sets. They are important historically, moreover, in that they provide the first extensive use of the variation in connection with ensemble media.[49]

Such works as L. van Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* (1804), and Thirty Two Variations in C minor (1806), and later R. Schumann's *Impromptus on*

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[48] Vitali, p. 2.

[49] R.U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1948), p. 80.

a Theme by Clara Wieck (1833), and, in 1845, F. Liszt's *Spanish Rhapsody*, all show a strong basso ostinato influence.
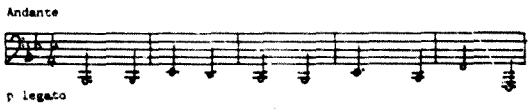
Liszt's *Variations on a Theme by J.S. Bach* (1866) for organ herald the unmistakable return of the true basso ostinato variation.

The outstanding composers of basso ostinato variations in the nineteenth century were J. Brahms (1833-1897) and M. Reger (1873-1916).

Brahms demonstrated his mastery of this type of variation in the Finale of the Fourth Symphony, Op. 98 (1885), and in his *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, Op. 56a (1873) for orchestra. Both the harmonic and melodic ostinato techniques occur in the Finale of the Fourth Symphony. At times the melody of the theme is present, while at other times the succession of harmonies is present.

In the Finale of the *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, Brahms uses the melodic basso ostinato technique fairly strictly.

Ex. 21: Basso ostinato theme from J. Brahms, *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, Op. 56a, Finale [50]



Passacaglias by Reger occur in his Suite in E minor, Op. 16, for organ, Introduction and Passacaglia from Six Pieces without Opus number, for organ, Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 96 for two pianos and Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 127, for organ.
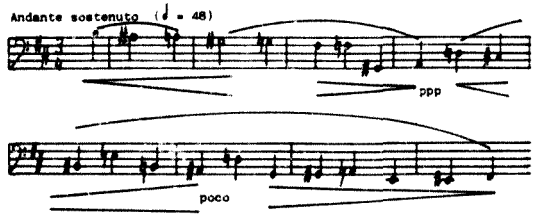
In the Introduction and Passacaglia from Six Pieces without Opus number, Reger adopts a very conservative approach. The eight measure theme remains in the bass throughout. Trochaic rhythm predominates in the theme. The theme length remains unaltered throughout, while the treatment of the upper voices becomes more and more complex.

In his Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 96, Reger uses a highly chromatic theme. Reger uses chromaticism as a persistent technique which is in no way comparable to the incidental use of chromaticism which occurs in the Baroque basso ostinato compositions.

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[50] J. Brahms, *Variations on a Theme of Haydn*, Op. 56a, in J. Brahms, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. III (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf, 1926), p. 27 (89).

Ex. 22: Basso ostinato theme from M. Reger, Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 96[51]



Nelson regards Reger's Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 127 (1913) as concluding the nineteenth-century period of basso ostinato variations.[52] Once again the eight measure theme is characterized by chromaticism and trochaic rhythm. The length of the theme, the trochaic rhythm and the introduction of the theme in an unaccompanied form as well as the linking of the passacaglia to a fugue, all point to the influence of Bach's Passacaglia in C minor, BWV 582.

The stock bass formulae of the Baroque basso ostinato variations were discarded in the nineteenth-century type. The conventional length of the basso ostinato theme during the Baroque was four or eight measures. Reger generally adopts an eight measure theme. Brahms, however, uses a five-measure theme in the Finale of his *Variations on a Theme of Haydn* (see. Ex. 21, p. 303).

While the Baroque basso ostinato variations were usually independent, self-contained compositions, during the nineteenth century they were either linked with other forms or form part of multimovement works. The appearance of a basso ostinato movement as the Finale of Brahms's Fourth Symphony marks the first occasion on which a basso ostinato movement is included in a symphony. Reger frequently links his passacaglias to a fugue, a procedure also adopted by J.S. Bach.

Compared with their Baroque predecessors, these nineteenth-century basso ostinato variations are characterized by:.

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[51] M. Reger, Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue, Op. 96, in M. Reger, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. XIV, ed. W. Rehm (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf, 1954), pp. 7-8 (69-70).

[52] Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, p. 108.

- a discarding of the stock bass formulae
- greater contrasts of expression
- a heightened use of colour
- increased use of chromaticism
- more frequent invasion of the upper voices by the basso ostinato theme.

Nelson comments on the nineteenth-century basso ostinato variation:
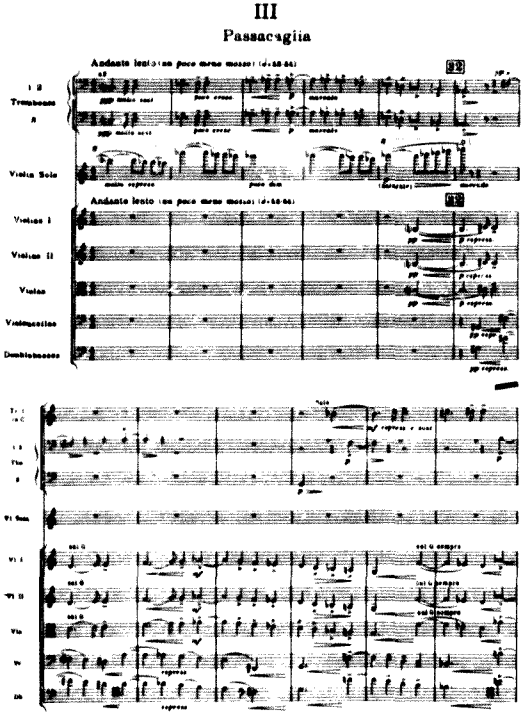
> That it did not achieve wider prominence may be attributed more to the disinclination of late nineteenth-century composers to adhere to strict forms in general than to any paucity of constructional and emotional possibilities within the type itself. [53]

[53] Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, p. 111.

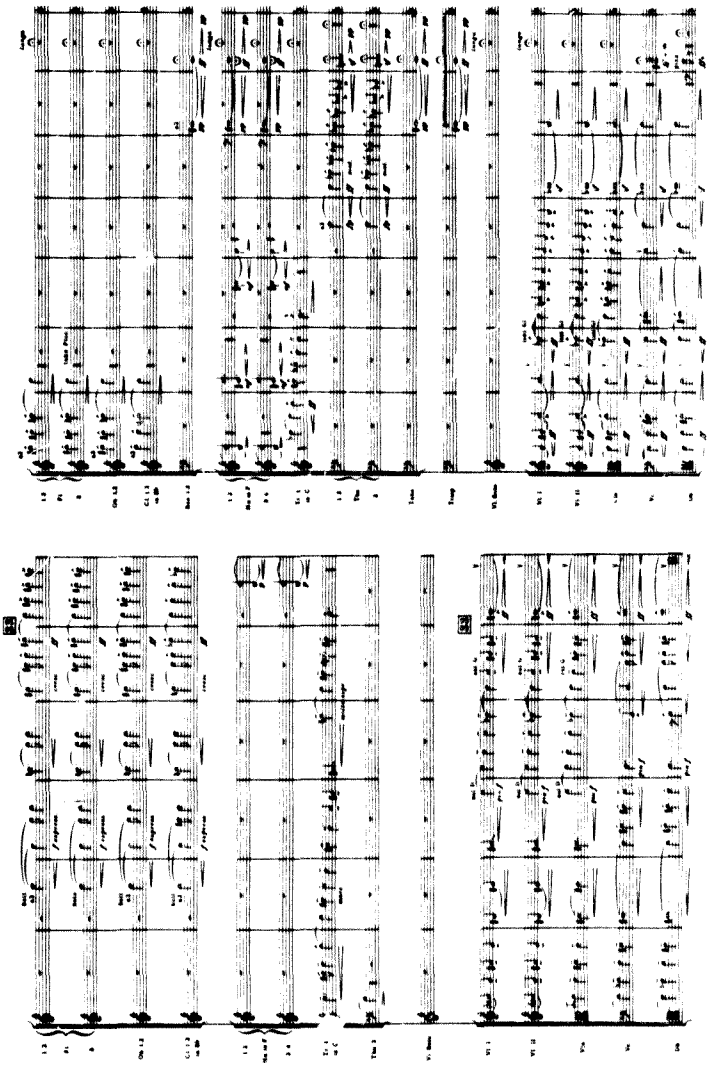
APPENDIX B
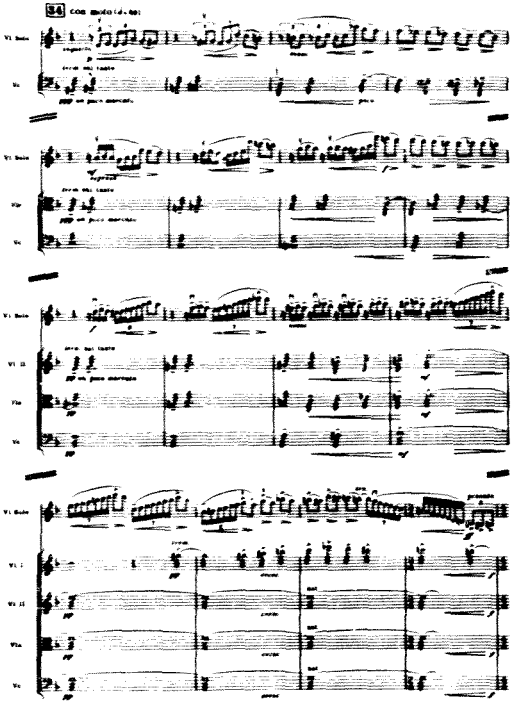
EXCERPTS FROM SCORES
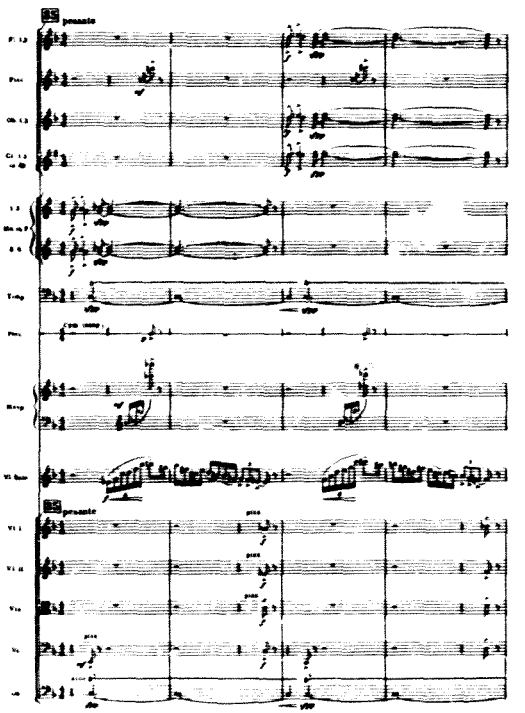
Ex. 1: B. Britten, Violin Concerto, Op. 15, [1] III, mm. 1-45



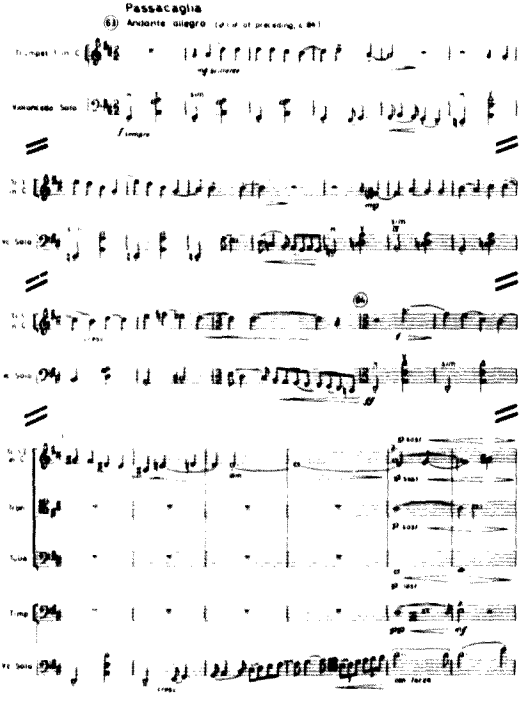
[1] Britten, Violin Concerto, pp. 80-84.
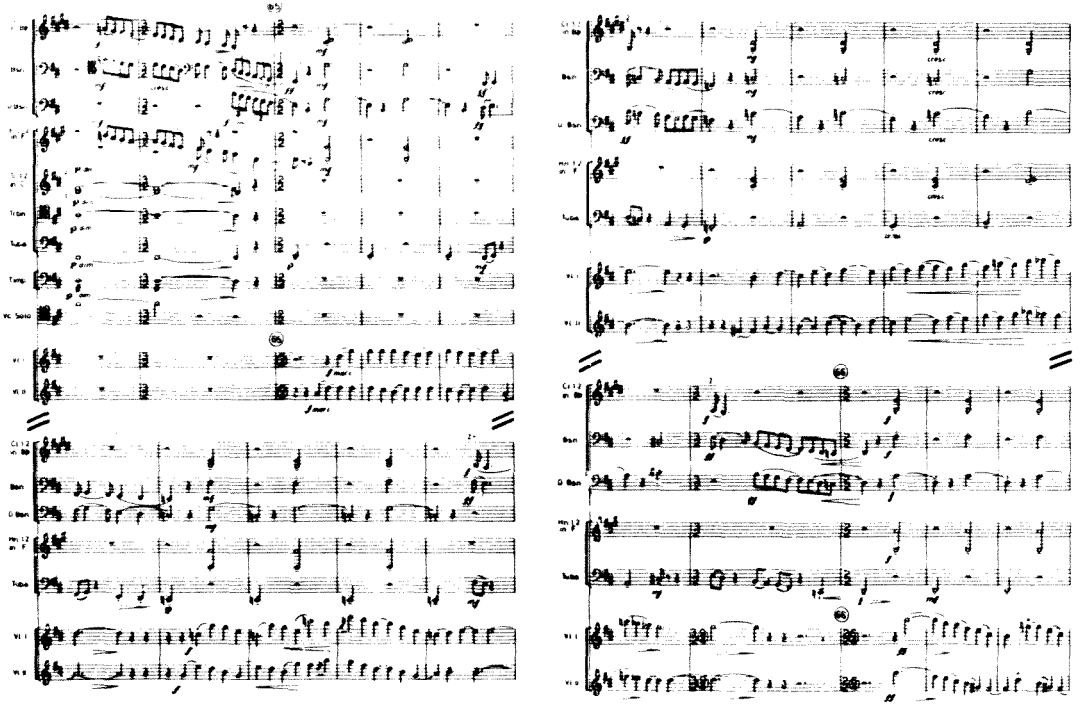



84
con sord. (ad lib.)
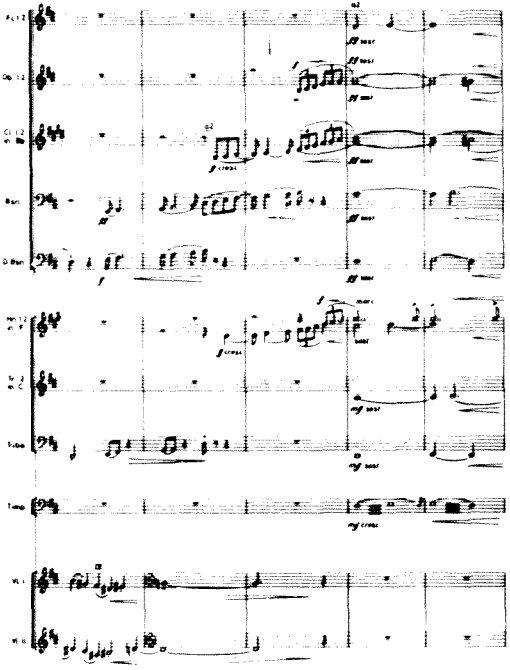

85
presto
85
presto
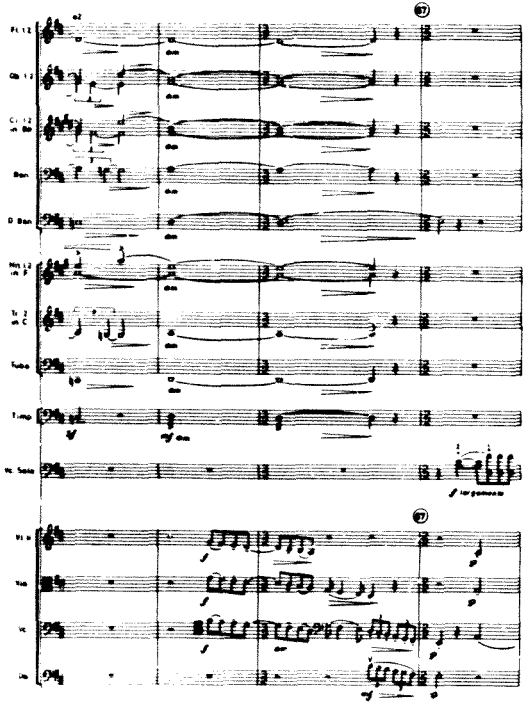
Ex. 2: B. Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, Op. 68,[2] IV, mm. 1-53
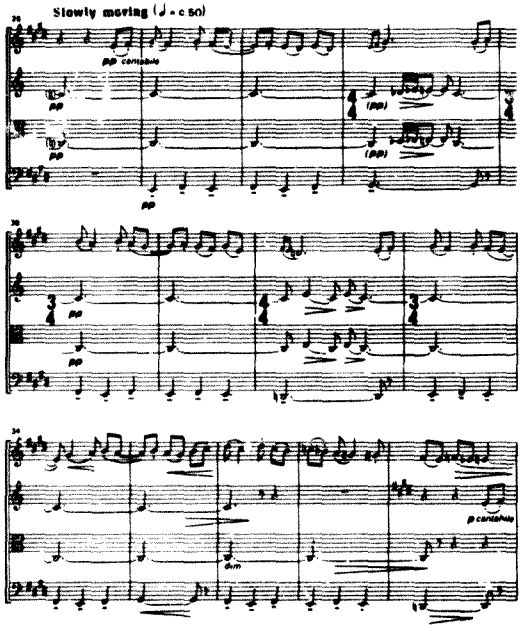


[2] Britten, *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*, pp. 88-92.
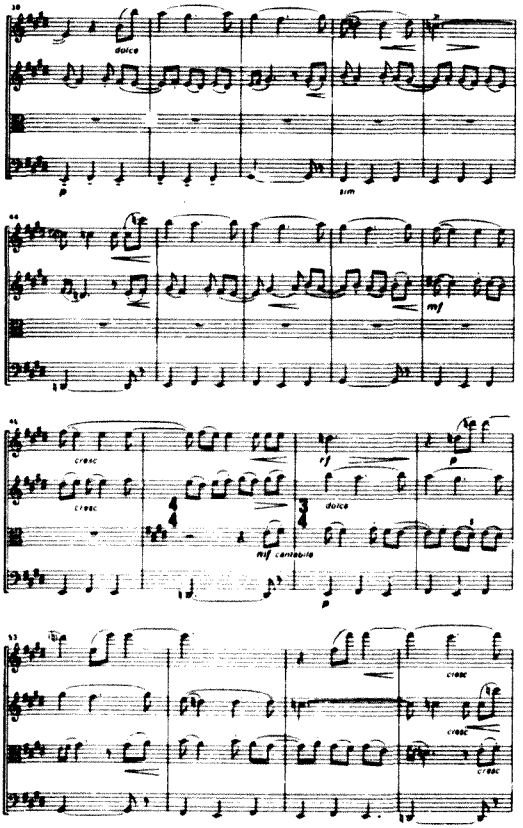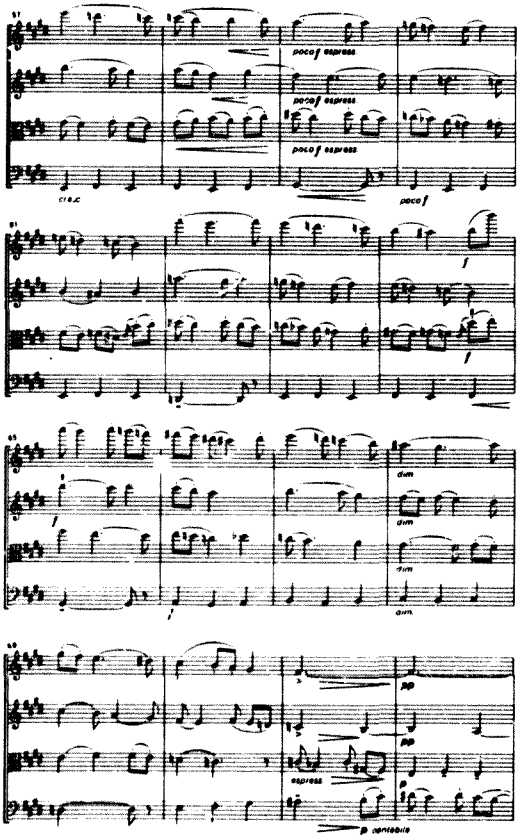






Ex. 3: B. Britten, String Quartet no. 3, Op. 94,[3] V, mm. 1-47



[3] Britten, String Quartet no. 3, pp. 31-33.


dolce
sim
mf
cresc
cresc
rf
p
dolce
mf cantabile
cresc
cresc


poco f espress
poco f espress
poco f espress
cresc
poco f
f
f
dim
dim
dim
pp
pp
espress
p
p cantabile

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