

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PASSACAGLIA of Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 582

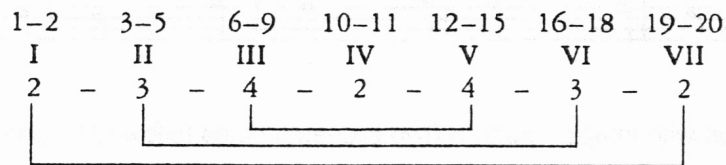
(Brief summary of Christoph Wolff's essay in
BACH - Essays on His Life and Music, Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England, 1991, pp. 306-316)

The Passacaglia consists of two parts:

20 variations - preceded by the theme, unaccompanied (total of 173 measures)
fugue (123 measures)

Variations

The variations are presented in six groups which prove to be clearly symmetrical:



Section I (Variations 1 - 2)

Ostinato (theme) is in the bass

1 - upper range generally covers the second octave above middle c



2 - upper range covers the first octave above middle c



Section II (Variations 3 - 5)

Ostinato is in the bass. In Variation 5, theme is drawn into the motivic work of the upper parts.

3 - upper part primarily made up of eighth notes moving step-wise



4 - sustains the linear motion with anapest pattern (two sixteenth notes followed by one eighth note)



5 - retains the anapest rhythmic model but melodic progressions are split into larger intervals



Section III (Variations 6 - 9)

Ostinato is in the bass. In Variation 9, theme is drawn into the motivic work of the upper parts. The rhythmic design of the variation group is based on a steady and uninterrupted flow of sixteenths. The melodic design is as follows:

6 - sequential upbeat motifs of three sixteenth notes each, ascending step-wise



7 - sequential upbeat motifs of three sixteenth notes each, descending step-wise



8 - sequential upbeat motifs of three sixteenth notes each, pairs of voices ascending and descending step-wise in contrary motion



9 - sequential upbeat motifs of three sixteenth notes each, now rising and falling in melodically disjunct motions (thirds)



Section IV (Variations 10 - 11)

Ostinato is in the bass (lowest voice) for variation 10. At the point variation 11 starts, the ostinato moves to the soprano (top voice). This is also the midpoint of the variations:

- first half (var. 1-10)
- second half (var. 11-20) starts at measure 88

- 10 - the ostinato functions finally as a bass support for chordal strokes with running sixteenth notes in soprano
 11 - the two-part texture of this variation indicates that from now on the regularly applied four-part writing in the first half will no longer be the rule. The running sixteenth notes are now in the lower voice.

Section V (Variations 12 - 15)

Ostinato starts in the top voice (soprano) and migrates down through the lower voices but never gets back to the bass (pedal) in this section.

These variations are based on the following elements:

- descent of the ostinato from the top to the bottom register
- decrease of part texture from four parts to a single line
- progressively embellished dissolution of The ostinato theme

- 12 - begins with the statement of the ostinato in the upper part, whereas the three lower parts form a dense texture of a predominantly descending "step-pattern" motif

- 13 - turns to three-part texture, the ostinato moving into the middle register (alto range)

14 - reduces the texture to two parts, with the ostinato in the lower part



15 - retains but a single part, the ostinato being formed by pointed sixteenth notes on beats three and one in alternating soprano and bass registers



Section VI (Variations 16 - 18)

Ostinato is back solidly in the pedal. In Variation 18 the pedal marks the conclusion of the group once again in motivic adaptation.

16 - acciaccatura-like, successive "clusters" of six-part chords



17 - three-part setting with brilliant concertato duo of the upper parts in triplet motion



18 - chordal writing impeded by syncopation and fluent melodic writing in sixths and tenths



Section VII (Variations 19 - 20)

Ostinato in pedal without any motivic adaptations,

19 - four-voice upbeat beginning of syncopated chordal circular and sequential (dialoging) sixteenth-note elaboration



20 - three-voice upbeat beginning widening to five voices with outer, then inner voices taking turns with the circular sixteenth-note elaboration ending with a final climactic sonority to introduce the fugue



Fugue (Variation 21)

Bach inscribed this final portion of the entire work *thema fugatum*, indicating that, in contrast to the preceding variation parts, the treatment of the theme will be fugal and in strict four-part writing.

This handout will not deal with the fugue in detail other than to say the original theme is Subject 1 and a new theme is introduced as Subject 2. These subjects are presented the majority of the time in *stretto* – layered on top of each other.

Thema fugatum

The musical notation for 'Thema fugatum' consists of three staves. The top staff contains the melody for Subject 1, which begins with a circled '21'. The middle staff contains the melody for Subject 2, which is a more active, eighth-note pattern. The bottom staff is empty. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

Original Theme - Subject 1

The musical notation for 'Original Theme - Subject 1' is a single staff in bass clef. It contains a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F6, G6, A6, B6, C7, D7, E7, F7, G7, A7, B7, C8, D8, E8, F8, G8, A8, B8, C9, D9, E9, F9, G9, A9, B9, C10, D10, E10, F10, G10, A10, B10, C11, D11, E11, F11, G11, A11, B11, C12, D12, E12, F12, G12, A12, B12, C13, D13, E13, F13, G13, A13, B13, C14, D14, E14, F14, G14, A14, B14, C15, D15, E15, F15, G15, A15, B15, C16, D16, E16, F16, G16, A16, B16, C17, D17, E17, F17, G17, A17, B17, C18, D18, E18, F18, G18, A18, B18, C19, D19, E19, F19, G19, A19, B19, C20, D20, E20, F20, G20, A20, B20, C21, D21, E21, F21, G21, A21, B21, C22, D22, E22, F22, G22, A22, B22, C23, D23, E23, F23, G23, A23, B23, C24, D24, E24, F24, G24, A24, B24, C25, D25, E25, F25, G25, A25, B25, C26, D26, E26, F26, G26, A26, B26, C27, D27, E27, F27, G27, A27, B27, C28, D28, E28, F28, G28, A28, B28, C29, D29, E29, F29, G29, A29, B29, C30, D30, E30, F30, G30, A30, B30, C31, D31, E31, F31, G31, 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