

Passacaglia

The **passacaglia** (Italian: [pasːaˈkaʎːa], English: /pæsəˈkɑːliə/) is a musical form that originated in early seventeenth-century Spain and is still used by contemporary composers. It is usually of a serious character and is often, but not always, based on a bass-ostinato and written in triple metre.

Origins and features

The term *passacaglia* (Spanish: *pasacalle*; French: *passacaille*; Italian: **passacaglia**, **passacaglio**, **passagallo**, **passacagli**, **passacaglie**) derives from the Spanish *pasar* (to walk) and *calle* (street). It originated in early 17th century Spain as a Spanish: *rasgueado* (strummed) interlude between instrumentally accompanied dances or songs. Despite the form's Spanish roots (confirmed by references in Spanish literature of the period), the first written examples of passacaglias are found in an Italian source dated 1606.^[1] These pieces, as well as others from Italian sources from the beginning of the century, are simple, brief sequences of chords outlining a cadential formula.^[2]

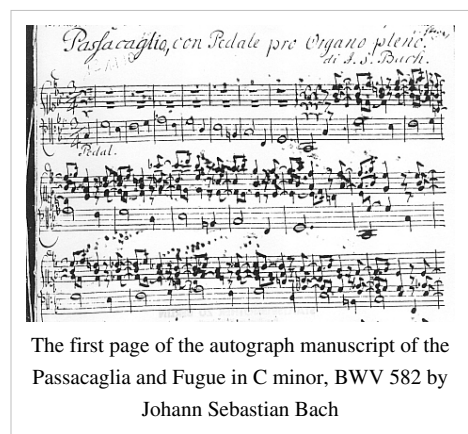
The passacaglia was redefined in late 1620s by Italian composer Girolamo Frescobaldi, who transformed it into a series of continuous variations over a bass (which itself may be varied).^[3] Later composers adopted this model, and by the nineteenth century the word came to mean a series of variations over an ostinato pattern, usually of a serious character.^[4] A similar form, the chaconne, was also first developed by Frescobaldi. The two genres are closely related, but since "composers often used the terms chaconne and passacaglia indiscriminately [...] modern attempts to arrive at a clear distinction are arbitrary and historically unfounded".^[5] In early scholarship, attempts to formally differentiate between the historical chaconne and passacaglia were made, but researchers often came to opposite conclusions. For example, Percy Goetschius held that the chaconne is usually based on a harmonic sequence with a recurring soprano melody, and the passacaglia was formed over a ground bass pattern,^[6] whereas Clarence Lucas defined the two forms in precisely the opposite way.^[7] More recently, however, some progress has been made toward making a useful distinction for the usage of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when some composers (notably Frescobaldi and François Couperin) deliberately mixed the two genres in the same composition.^[8]

Composers

One of the best known examples of the passacaglia in Western classical music is the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 582 for organ by Johann Sebastian Bach. The French clavecinists, especially Louis Couperin and his nephew François Couperin, were noted for their use of the *passecaille* form, even though they tended to deviate from the passacaglia form, often assuming a form of recurring episodes in rondo. Other examples are the organ passacaglias of Dieterich Buxtehude, Johann Pachelbel, Sigfrid Karg-Elert, Johann Kaspar Kerll, Daniel Gregory Mason, Georg Muffat, Gottlieb Muffat, Johann Kuhnau, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Juan Cabanilles, Bernardo Pasquini, Max Reger, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Leo Sowerby.

Heinrich Ignaz Biber's "Passacaglia", the last piece of the monumental *Mystery Sonatas*, is one of the earliest known compositions for solo violin.

The central episode of Claudio Monteverdi's madrigal "Lamento della Ninfa" is a passacaglia on a descending tetrachord. The first two movements of the fourth sonata from Johann Heinrich Schmelzer's *Sonatae unarum fidium* are passacaglias on a descending tetrachord, but in uncharacteristic major.



The fourth movement of Luigi Boccherini's Quintettino No. 6, Op. 30, (also known as "Musica notturna delle strade di Madrid") is titled "Passacalle".

There are such ensemble examples of the form as the *passacaille* "Les plaisirs ont choisi" from Jean-Baptiste Lully's opera *Armide* (1686) and Dido's lament, "When I am Laid in Earth", in Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, and others, such as the aria "Piango, gemo, sospiro" by Antonio Vivaldi, or "Usurpator tiranno" and "Stabat Mater" by Giovanni Felice Sances, et al.

Nineteenth-century examples include the C-minor passacaglia for organ by Felix Mendelssohn, and the finale of Josef Rheinberger's Eighth Organ Sonata. Notable passacaglias by Brahms can be found in the last movements of his Fourth Symphony and the Variations on a Theme by Haydn, in which the bass repeats the same harmonic pattern throughout the piece. The last movement of George Frideric Handel's Harpsichord Suite in G minor (HWV 432) is a passacaglia which has become well known as a duo for violin and viola, arranged by the Norwegian violinist Johan Halvorsen. The first movement of Hans Huber's Piano Concerto No. 3 op. 113 (1899) is a passacaglia.^[9]

Paul Hindemith uses the passacaglia in the piano part of the second movement ("Die Darstellung Mariä im Tempel") of the song cycle *Das Marienleben*, and in the third movement of *Nobilissima Visione*.

Passacaglias for lute have been composed by figures such as Alessandro Piccinini, G. H. Kapsberger, Sylvius Leopold Weiss, Esaias Reusner, Count Logy, Robert de Visée, Jacob Bittner, Philipp Franz Lesage De Richee, Gleitsmann, Dufaut, Gallot, Denis Gaultier, Ennemond Gaultier, and Roman Turovsky-Savchuk, a passacaglia for bandura by Julian Kytasty, and for baroque guitar by Paulo Galvão, Santiago de Murcia, Francisco Guerau, Gaspar Sanz, and Marcello Vitale.

Notes

- [1] Hudson 1971, 364.
- [2] Silbiger 2001.
- [3] Silbiger 2001.
- [4] Silbiger 2001.
- [5] Bukofzer 1947, 42.
- [6] Goetschius 1915, 29 and 40
- [7] Lucas 1908, 203.
- [8] Silbiger 1996.
- [9] Murtomäki 2008.

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External links

- Passacaglias and Chaconnes for Lute (<http://polyhymnion.org/swv/ostinato.html>)
 - Passacaglias and Chaconnes for Baroque Guitar (<http://polyhymnion.org/adc/music-download.htm>)
 - Analysis of Passacaglia and fugue by J. S. Bach (<http://bach.nau.edu/BWV582/BWV582b.html>)
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