

Remarks on two uses of *passacaglia* form: Lutosławski's *Piano Concerto* and Schnittke's *Cello Concerto No. 2*

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PASSACAGLIA, LIKE FUGUE, canon, and variations, is a principle of the highest adaptability. Although, like them all, it reached a status of eminence in the Baroque era—which it naturally recalls—, we can safely say that its principle is ‘timeless’ in the history of music. As opposed to sonata-form, an achievement of Classical period that pervaded Romanticism with a then seemingly endless fertility, but then receded with tonality, those ‘Baroque’ principles are ubiquitous and evergreen. The highly specialized constructions of the tonal era were dependant to such extent on the tonal environment that they could not adapt themselves to the new conditions;¹ *passacaglia* is so basic a principle, that it can adapt to tonality *as well as* to other musical environments.

On the other hand, ‘musical environments’ in the twentieth century (particularly in its second half) were not wide, neither in time nor in space; conditions changed from composer to composer, and often also from piece to piece. In the this paper I study the ‘adaptation’ of the *passacaglia*

¹Of course, sonata-form has ‘survived’ as compositional and analytical guides, for instance in the famous case of Webern’s *Variations*; but it lost its central place as a means of communication between composer and listener. The scheme *exposition-development-reexposition* is anything but dead, *but* one the most important defining features of sonata-form, the convention that in the reexposition everything is presented in the main key (thus giving a resolution to the tonal conflict) has little adaptability to non-tonal environments. That is why post-tonal sonata-form-like structures tend to relate more to a plain ternary form than to the Classical-Romantic formal concept.

principle to two of those musical environments, namely the *Piano Concerto* by Lutosławski (1987) and the *Cello Concerto No. 2* by Schnittke (1990). Common traits, such as the *concertante* context and the use of the *passacaglia* as last, closing movement, are explored, and contrasted to more ‘individual’ tints in the way each of the two composers applies the same procedure.

The pseudo-biological approach I am taking (with no pretensions of being more than ‘pseudo’) shapes the study in a special way: neither the composers nor the pieces are the ‘living organisms;’ rather, they function as conditions, as ‘musical environments,’ passively providing contexts to the actually active agent, the *passacaglia* principle. Instead of asking why and how these composers used the latter, I focus in the why and how the *passacaglia* found its way to and ‘took root’ in them, how the different conditions are mirrored by differences in its details—its ‘mutations,’ as it were.



THE DEVELOPMENT OF LUTOSŁAWSKI’S music can be interpreted in terms of the development of a central concern, namely the search for a compromise between control and spontaneity. His *aleatory technique*,² used almost without exception since his *Jeux Venetians* (1960) is a manifestation of this concern: even though the situation is spontaneous to some degree, the composer controls the general effect—a kind of ‘curtain’ that keeps its nature regardless of the actual realization, and in any case not an arbitrary superposition of different musics. This control, which takes Lutosławski away from the freedom of (some of) Cage’s music, is not, however, the detailed manipulation of Boulez or Ligeti. On the other hand, the alternation and relationship between aleatoric and metered passages, a further relationship between spontaneity and control, is one of the most important dramatic features of Lutosławski’s music.

²Whereby the players have no common beat and play with no coordination during particular passages.

If the control-spontaneity issue is thus reflected in the musical texture, it informs also the musical form. The *chain technique*,³ first clear in the *Concerto for Orchestra* (1945), is to the listener what the *aleatory technique* is to the player: the composer controls the general perception of the form, but does not manipulate it in very detail, and has no way to predict it *a priori*.

ON THE OTHER HAND, SCHNITTKE'S main fingerprint is his interest in 'polystylistic' textures, meaning the juxtaposition of different styles, both synchronically (at the same time) and diachronically (as alternating formal sections). 'Style' refers mostly to harmonic organization, paradigmatically tonality vs. atonality; other juxtapositions that the music might imply (such as lyric vs. puntillistic, or chamber vs. orchestral) are rather by-products of the harmonic ones. It is worth noting that this polystylism is a concept all too dependent on perception, just as polytonality, in the sense that the auditive experience requires the separate identification of different layers, each one with its own very clear and consistent style. The analogy with a polychord is illuminating: in order to be perceived as a real juxtaposition of two (or more) different chords, a polychord needs its components to belong clearly to different harmonic motions—otherwise, it will be just a complex chordal formation.

Polystylism has general consequences on Schnittke's music: his instrumentation frequently includes instruments of so different and opposite a historic meaning as harpsichord and vibraphone, or baroque orchestra and prepared piano. In the realm of genre, his cultivation of both concerto grosso and symphony is significant, as is a particular piece of 'intersection,' namely his "*Concerto Grosso No. 4/Symphony No.5*." It is noteworthy that 'baroque' style (mostly in harmonic terms, but often informing as well other factors, such as orchestration) is omnipresent in his works.

³Whereby different sections systematically overlap each other, one starting when the previous one is not yet finished.

It is the basic ingredient, so to speak, to which others are to be added.

In order to create such ‘polybuildings,’ Schnittke needs completely to control the musical parts. Particularly, counterpoint can be very dense and yet every detail is always specified. In addition, almost every part, even the most ornamental, bears a melodic line. Thanks to careful orchestration, such a dense construction is still intelligible.



IT IS THE REPEATED ITERATION of a fixed theme what defines a piece or movement as being built upon the *passacaglia* procedure. The composer is free to set the amount of relative variation from one iteration to the next, but, as long as he wants to apply the principle proper, repetition must be steady and explicit. On the other hand, there is an *implicit* feature that follows almost inevitably from the explicit one: the repetition of a theme implies a clear separation between the theme itself and the rest of the texture at any given moment. There being something repeated again and again means that *other* things exist, that escape to this pattern, and somehow relate to it. In other words, the repeated theme provides a background for a different layer of events.

This characteristic is especially relevant here, since the handling of separate ‘layers’ is, as has been discussed, central to both Lutosławski’s and Schnittke’s styles (each in his own manner). Furthermore, this implication of the *passacaglia* principle links it to the *concertante* principle rather naturally and immediately. *Passacaglia* occurs frequently in concertos, another example being Shostakovich’s *First Violin Concerto*.

But there is another, less obvious but equally customary quality of *passacaglia*: composers using it tend to build the movement as a continuously growing organism, with increasing levels of dynamic, complexity, tension, etc. It often bears the culminating point of the piece, and therefore tends to be in the final position. Why is this so?

This has surely something to do with a desire, on the composers' part, that the theme is clearly stated at the beginning, so that it will serve in the role of reference and comparison point that is intended for it. Although there is nothing intrinsic to the *passacaglia* principle that prescribes a transparent first exposition of the theme, this is a feature shared, remarkably, by almost all *passacaglias*, ranging from Pachelbel's *Canon*, through Brahms' famous *passacaglia* finales, Ravel's *Bolero*, Britten's *Guide to the Orchestra*, etc., to Lutosławski and Schnittke's movements in question. In this there is another relationship with fugue, for it has been customary, without being necessary, that a fugue exposition (or a *fugato*) opens with a relatively light texture (most often monodic, with the subject left completely alone) and builds up in complexity and tension.

IN THIS WAY, THREE FEATURES COMMON to the two movements under consideration can be, at least in part, 'deduced' from the characteristics of the *passacaglia* principle: *a*) that they are both part of a concerto; *b*) that they are both the final movement of it; and *c*) that their general shape is a gradual increase reaching a climatic point for the whole piece. This is the basic core of the organism that found its way to two different environments; beyond that basic core, however, each branches out in different directions, developing distinct characters to adapt to varied conditions.



THE MOST OBVIOUS DIFFERENCE between the two *passacaglias* is that the soloist in Lutosławski's concerto never plays the *passacaglia* theme, while that in Schnittke's does. This difference, however, is essentially the result of another, more important one, that has to do with the way the *passacaglia* principle relates to the form of each piece.

In Lutosławski's description of his *passacaglia*, against the background of the theme, "the piano each time presents another episode. *They come together only once*, towards the end of



Figure 1: Lutosławski's *passacaglia* theme.

the work.”⁴ Here we see Lutosławski's favorite chain procedure: the episodes of the piano do not start nor end with the different reiterations of the *passacaglia* theme, but produce a constant formal overlap. Given this characteristic (which we may assume Lutosławski conceived early in the compositional process), it is natural that the piano never plays the theme itself. In fact, if it did, the theme would appear displaced in the piano (with respect to the orchestra), implying imitation and, in general, a usual, contrapuntal treatment. ‘Usual contrapuntal treatment of themes,’ however, is almost nonexistent in Lutosławski's mature music, and in particular it is completely absent from this movement. What the orchestra does to the theme is almost exclusively timbre and register handling—never a canon, never a ‘countersubject’ or any other contrapuntal device.⁵

Lutosławski's theme (quoted in Figure 1) is very typical of its author. It is not only entirely made from a limited number of intervals, a procedure he applies to many melodies, but also those intervals are the most characteristic of his melodic invention: tritone and half-tone. (For example, the twelve-tone row of his *Funeral Music* is also made of these two intervals, though in a more regular way, alternating them). The register shifts, whereby minor seconds are expanded into minor

⁴From the original program note, translated and quoted by Charles Boldman Rae, *The music of Lutosławski*, expanded 3rd. edition (London, New York, Sydney: Omnibus Press, 1999), p. 218. My italics.

⁵Twelve of the eighteen statements preserve the *color* (intervallic structure) of the theme, and seventeen respect the original *talea* (rhythm). The variations in the remaining statements are not quite ‘contrapuntal’ variations, however. Only the sixth, by the horns, considerably alters the *color*, but it reproduces its general contour. In any case, these variations never play the oppositional or developmental rôles that a usual treatment of the theme would.

ninths, is also very common (cf. the opening violin solo of his *String Quartet*, or the piano and harp parts at the end of the second of the *Three poems by Henry Michaux*), as is the repetition of notes in chromatic progressions, and the tendency to ‘compensate’ the movement, after a leap, in the opposite direction, as in the last two measures (compare the succession of *glissandi* that opens his *Livre pour orchestre*).

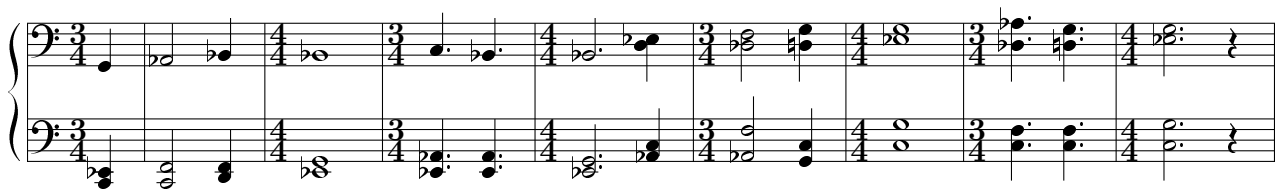


Figure 2: Schnittke’s *passacaglia* theme

SCHNITTKE’S THEME IS ALSO very typical of him (see Figure 2). It is a choral with a strong tonal feel, in the traditional sense of the word. In the second half, however, some dissonances appear, mainly in the alto part, that would not be easily accounted for by traditional harmonic analysis. Since it is also in the second half of the theme that a four-part texture is used (the first half features only three voices), it is tempting to interpret that the additional fourth voice is introduced *to create* the dissonances (thus departing from the tonal reference so strongly suggested by the first part). But the case is not so easy, for at some points the alto itself, the voice that has been added, bears also essential tones, for example the E_b in m. 7. That the presence of dissonance is thus not ‘consistent’ highlights and is highlighted by the nature of the tenor in this second part, namely a perfect-fourth oriented motion. This will be discussed later on.

In any case, rhythmic irregularity also detaches the theme from the tonal context that it resembles. Through all this, the theme both triggers off and counteracts references in the listener’s mind—which is a good description for the whole of Schnittke’s music.

The theme is first orchestrated for trombones. The use of bass brass for the first statement of a *passacaglia* theme is seen also in Schnittke's *Passacaglia for orchestra* and in the first movement of his *Symphony No. 8*. Shostakovich also did it this way in the *passacaglia* movement of his first *Violin Concerto*. That Schnittke is highly influenced by Shostakovich is well known and, incidentally, the mentioned eighth symphony is a clear (and beautiful) proof.

The semi-tonal nature of Schnittke's theme implies one of the characteristics that most importantly contrast to Lutosławski's movement. It features direction, and more precisely *directionality*. While in Lutosławski's theme the melodic cells are fairly independent from one another, each chord in Schnittke's choral is obviously dependent on the one that comes before and the one that comes after. It could be said that Lutosławski's theme is 'reductionistic' in that it is pretty much the sum of its components, while Schnittke's is 'holistic' in that it is not only the sum of its components, but also the particular arrangement and the relationships between them.

Because of that, Schnittke's choral creates senses of 'closure,' of periodization: the ending of each iteration of the theme is perceptually prominent, since it is predictable and expectable. This is not the case with Lutosławski's, whose theme, being more fragmented in itself, sectionalizes much less when an iteration ends and the next starts. Accordingly, Schnittke builds the form of the movement stem clearly from the structure of the theme itself, while, as I have said, the form in Lutosławski's movement is autonomous from the theme. The cello can and indeed does state the theme, because the whole ensemble, including the soloist, is responding to the theme's nature—in fact, rehearsal numbers in the score coincide with the theme's iterations. In Schnittke, the theme is the *unifying* element of the piece—not the *distinguishing* one that it is in Lutosławski's concerto.

ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE is another important difference in the treatment of the theme. As I have said, Lutosławski applies no contrapuntal devices to the theme, whereas in Schnittke the

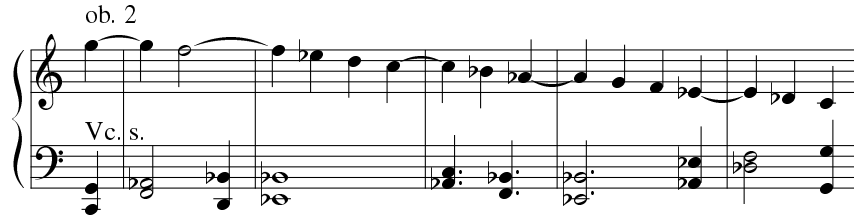


Figure 3: Beginning of Schnittke's fourth iteration

counterpoint is essential. Figure 3 shows the interplay of the theme (in the cello) and one of the accompanying voices at the beginning of one of the variations, rehearsal number 4 (measures 31–38), one of the most beautiful passages of the piece.

Over a string pedal point in c, this counterpoint features completely conventional a downward suspension chain. The final c in the oboe is taken over by the second bassoon, that continues the idea although introducing tritone leaps that depart from the conventional. The counterpoint of these two lines, thus, responds to the nature of the theme in that it is very closely mapped on functional tonality in its starting half, but abandons it afterwards. But it is how Schnittke fills up the texture with voices not depicted in Figure 3 that is most telling. In addition to the second oboe, the english horn and the first oboe are also playing, the latter doubled by vibraphone and tremolos in the marimba. They imitate strictly the quoted line of the second oboe: the english horn starts two quarter notes behind, and first oboe, vibraphone and marimba one quarter note. When the bassoon takes over the second oboe, the other two bassoons also take over the task of the imitation (in what is obviously the result of registral considerations).

As a result of the imitation, a whole set of downward-progressing chords by seconds is formed. The most prominent accompanying part (first oboe, vibraphone and marimba), playing one quarter note after the second oboe, frequently fall *on* the downbeat with the solo cello, blurring the impression of suspension. In an important place, fourth full measure of the quoted passage, the cello is playing the perfect fifth $\text{E}^{\flat}-\text{B}^{\flat}$, that is complemented by the simultaneously attacked A^{\flat} in the

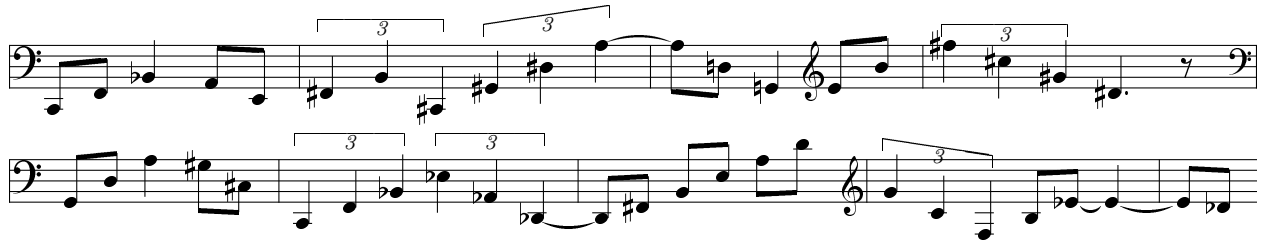


Figure 4: Cello line against the sixth repetition of the theme

first oboe line. A perfect-fourth chord is thus emphasized (as it had been implied in the second full measure of the passage with E_b-Bb-F), and indeed this is an important harmonic and melodic idea of the whole piece. I have already noted that the tenor voice of the original choral has a perfect-fourth nature in the second half. The thread is developed further in the third iteration (when the cello enters for the first time), in which bass clarinet, first bassoon, and counter-bassoon provide a bass part for the first phrase of the choral in the three trumpets, with the ascending progression $c-F-Bb-Eb$. In the second half of this iteration, English horn, clarinet, bass clarinet, and bassoon play A_b-D_b-G-c , while the cello itself is also emphasizing some perfect fifths.

That the thread is an important one, and that its development is an essential element of the narrative of the piece, is confirmed little afterwards, in the sixth variation (the theme is in the celesta), when the cello plays the melody in Figure 4. As had been happening, successions of perfect fifths/fourths alternate with other intervals, mainly seconds and tritones (the latter a clear variation of the fifth/fourth idea); but, starting on the low c in the fifth measure of the passage, there is at last a *complete* succession of fifths/fourths, encompassing the whole chromatic scale.

All this points to the close relationship that ties the *passacaglia* theme and the additional lines that accompany it in its repetitions. The relationships can be based on what would be ‘tonal’ considerations (like suspension chains) and ‘atonal’ ones (like intervallic structure). The idea of imitation, implied by the discussed passage, is born first as the imitation of an almost wholly

‘tonal’ counterpoint, but it serves as the pivot point that articulate toward atonal handling. Thus we have the mentioned imitation of a tonal suspension chains, that forms chords by seconds with no tonal meaning.

Stemming from there, later on in the piece, the theme itself is imitated and is converted into an essentially atonal texture: in [10] (measures 79–86), the theme is played in the original key of c minor by violas 3–10 (*divisi* into three groups), *and* imitated at a distance of quarter note by the double-basses, in B major. For the next iteration, the idea is taken one step further: second violins 3–12 play it in c minor, violas imitate in B major a quarter note later, and double-basses a further quarter note apart in B minor. The process goes on, each time with more layers of imitation, more different ‘keys,’ and a shorter imitation distance. At [17], virtually each of the string instruments is playing its own part, and imitate each other at a triplet-eighth-note of distance.

This gives raise to similar developments in the winds, although new melodic motives are used (other than the theme itself). The texture thus becomes more and more dense, the time feels flowing more and more rapidly. Finally, the tension is released by a very dissonant explosion of the theme in brass, at [21], over a string-cluster and tightly imitated rapid motives in winds.

LUTOSŁAWSKI’s *finale* ALSO is shaped as an increase toward a *tutti* exposition of the theme. But the means to achieve the increase are very different from those of Schnittke. The texture also grows denser, but never in the extent seen in the latter’s concerto. For one thing, the main burden of textural increase is given to the solo piano (which is obviously better suited to that end than the cello). In fact, just before the *fortissimo* climactic exposition of the theme in rehearsal number [113], the piano has chords of three or more notes, in a lively movement. Earlier in the piece, chord of several notes had been played, but in a paused manner, and not *fortissimo* (see for example [104]).



Figure 5: *Talea* of Lutosławski's theme in oboe and timpani

But the main difference is the treatment of the theme itself, in the orchestra. The texture is virtually always kept to one voice, i.e. to the theme played in several octaves. A representative example is [101], where the strings play most of the theme, only punctuated by the winds (*all the winds, everyone playing the same note, just in different registers*) for selected notes.

Since relatively early in the piece, however, a technique is applied to the theme whereby several instruments start playing each cell of the theme, each reaching one of the notes and staying there. Thus chords are formed, and the texture does in effect grow. But clearly this is not the same kind of textural increase we see in Schnittke's concerto. The 'structural' texture here, i.e. the number of voices, keeps low: 1. In other words, the texture may have increased, but not by any contrapuntal means.

In [105], there is a variation of the theme that proves structurally important: the oboe and timpani distribute among themselves the rhythm (*talea*) of the initial section of the theme as shown in Figure 5. This is happening over a succession of long chords in strings, in which the first violin doubles the oboe, and the bass strings play G (as the timpani), in another example of a texture denser than 1-voice, but with no contrapuntal derivation. The procedure shown in the figure is important because of two things it inaugurates: the repetition of 'stubborn' notes, and the alternation between percussions and other instruments. From that moment on, it will be usual that, along with many instruments playing the theme in several registers, some instruments homorhythmically hold one or more 'stubborn' notes. This is what the three clarinets do in [107], while the two bassoons play

the theme. In addition to them, the bass drum plays a motorrhythm of eighth notes, *when the theme has rests*, in alternation with the winds.

The more continuous flow of sound thus created gives the passage a ‘trembling,’ anxious quality. The tempo is also increased (*più mosso*), so that the whole has an effect of increasing movement. The ‘alternating’ trend is further developed later in the piece: in [109], the whole orchestra (but percussions) plays the theme, again mostly one voice and some ‘stubborn’ voices, and the soloist (a percussion instrument, after all) plays when the theme is silent. In the climactic statement of the theme in [113], the originally long periods of rest collapse into eighth rests, thereby achieving the maximum increase in movement. Again, this corresponds to a similar trend in Schnittke’s piece, but the means to achieve it are completely different, there through counterpoint, here without resembling traditional treatment of themes.



WE HAVE SEEN HOW THE SAME constructive principle of composition, the *passacaglia* principle, has been applied by two radically different composers. It has been emphasized that the principle, in its generic definition, works very naturally in conjunction with both Lutosławski’s and Schnittke’s styles, so that it was possible for it independently to ‘take root’ in pieces written by them.

But the differences have also been pointed out, differences that also stem from the difference in style between the composers. Their styles pervade the *passacaglia* principle in all its dimensions, from the theme itself (very austere and fragmented in Lutosławski, quasi-tonal in Schnittke), through its impact on form (oblique in Lutosławski, direct in Schnittke), to its treatment in relation the rest of the material (‘conventional,’ contrapuntal in Schnittke, much less determined or determining in Lutosławski).

This all shows that *passacaglia* is a very flexible and versatile principle. It determines some aspects of the musical work, but leaves open so many others, that composers with a wide range of

approaches can and feel compelled to exploit it in their particular ways. Once they have done this, the results are very closely attached to them—the principle has lost adaptability, but it has already adapted and helped to create living forms.