Jurnal SENI MUSIK
Vol. 15, No. 2 Oktober 2023 page: 51 - 63
DOI: dx.doi.org/xx.xxxxxx/jsm.v1i1.xxx
P-ISSN: 1829-8990 E-ISSN: 2580-5371

Composing Contemporary Music Through Traditional Music Form: Perspectives from Compositional Process of *Passacaglia*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to provide new perspectives in composing innovative music by using traditional musical form into a contemporary music context, in connection with the European music historical course. *Passacaglia* form becomes the focus in this research due to the frequent use by composers from various musical periods, despite his early occurrence back hundred years ago. The research method primarily adopts the practice-based research method and involves analytical approach with qualitative and descriptive nature in two different stages. First, by analyzing various representative passacaglia music throughout different eras and describing the innovative qualities in their era, and secondly, by analyzing the application and transformation of the idea in the first stage analysis into the compositional process of the researcher's music *Passacaglia*. The research is expected to stimulate various creative and innovative compositional processes that can transform a traditional musical form into contemporary context, through analytical observations towards various composer's approaches and individual exploration.

Keywords: contemporary music, composition, passacaglia, musical form

Received: 26/09/2023 Revised: 26/10/2023 Published: 31/10/2023

Penciptaan Musik Kontemporer melalui Penggunaan Bentuk Musik Tradisional: Perspektif dari Proses Penciptaan Karya *Passacaglia*

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Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini untuk menawarkan beberapa perspektif baru melalui proses penciptaan komposisi musik inovatif dengan menggunakan bentuk musik tradisional ke dalam konteks musik kontemporer, khususnya yang mengacu pada jalur perkembangan sejarah musik di Eropa. Bentuk musik *passacaglia* menjadi fokus utama dalam penelitian ini karena meskipun bentuk ini telah muncul ratusan tahun lalu, namun masih kerap dieksplorasi oleh berbagai komponis dari berbagai era musik. Metode penelitian dalam studi ini secara utama menerapkan metode penelitian berbasis praktik dan melibatkan pendekatan analisis yang sifatnya kualitatif dan deskriptif yang dibagi melalui dua tahapan. Pertama, melalui analisa musik *passacaglia* yang mewakili berbagai era musik dengan penjabaran nilai kebaruan di setiap era tersebut, dan juga analisa penerapan dan trasnformasi ide dari analisa tahap pertama tersebut dalam proses penciptaan karya penulis *Passacaglia*. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat membuka pintu terhadap berbagai ide penggarapan musik yang kreatif dan inovatif dalam mentransformasi bentuk musik tradisi ke dalam konteks masa kini, melalui pengamatan-pengamatan yang sifatnya analitis terhadap pendekatan berbagai komponis dan juga eksplorasi individual.

Kata Kunci: musik kontemporer, komposisi, penciptaan musik, passacaglia, bentuk musik

Introduction

Developing composition with creativity and originality has been one of the challenges for composers throughout the time, and this challenge has become more significant in recent time. The radical breakthrough and inventions in musical languages and forms in the 20th century has made a great impact on how recent composers finding new ideas in their works. On one hand, this rapid development has left the composers with little space to achieve comparable innovations in recent time. The exploration of the unexplored area in the music-making seems to reach its limit with presumably fewer things to discover. On the other hand, the development has left the composers with vast array of new possibilities and models to create new music (Mack, 2009). However, these models are often used arbitrarily to portray the newness of the composition and

therefore, do not necessarily reflect the creativity and originality of the composer. In fact, creativity and originality could only arise when this abundance influence can be transformed according to composer's distinct methods, through limitation and selection of various compositional processes that characterise their music. As Stravinsky (1947) noted, creativity and freedom would be meaningful only if there is constraint and limitation to them (p. 65). Amidst the limitation to create innovation in recent time, using musical models from the distant past could be one of the most potential alternative approaches.

Looking back to the past centuries, many composers had learned to develop their own compositional techniques by working on the existing music compositions. In the Baroque period, copying musical scores from other composers has been one of the ways to learn composing (Butt, 1997, p. 200) Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the great composer of Baroque period, has been known doing this method secretly at that time (Wolff, 2001, p.45). Another form was done by Romantic composers by reviving existing music repertoires at that time, such can be seen in some Frans Liszt's transcription of Beethoven's orchestral music, Schubert's *lieder*, and also Paganini's variation (Oron, 2006). In the beginning of 20th century music development, some composers attempt to develop a creative method by departing from the advance of tonality in 19th century post- Romantic music and creating their own musical languages and structures, as can be seen in the works by Debussy, Stravinsky's early compositions, and Schoenberg among other composers (Lobanova, 2000).

To a further extent, some composer has made more explicit rejection toward the musical establishment of the past, such as Pierre Boulez (Mack, 2000, p. 25). Interestingly, despite his strong rejection toward the historical reference, several of his compositions in contrast also demonstrate some degree of connection to the tradition, for example his *Third Piano Sonata*, in which he used the principal of interchangeability into sonata form (Lobanova, 2000, p. 29). From a more positive perspective, his rejection should be more interpreted not as neglection to the tradition. Rather, using the description of Marina Lobanova (2000), as 'the heightened reflection' towards individual context; the awareness of link and separation between the past and present of each composers (p. 16). Disconnection with the past is as important as the connection with the past, to express composer's unique individual quality with the musical form in the past, which particularly has a very deep root in musical tradition and history, for example, in this context, passacaglia form.

Passacaglia is a musical form originating from Latin America, which is then imported to Spain and Italy in the 17th century (Grout & Palisca, 1988). In Spain, the form was built from repetitive pattern of guitar chords that proceed and follow strophes of a song. In Italy, this pattern was transformed into a bass line to adapt with instrumental setting. The form was frequently used by many important composers in Europe around later 17th and early 18th century, such as Frescobaldi and J.S Bach in Germany, Lully, Couperin, and Cluck in France, and Handel and Purcell in England (Scholes, 1970). The general characteristic of Passacaglia is a slow dance in three beats framed upon a ground bass, occurring frequently in minor modes. This form is often interchanged as Chaconne, which shares many similarities with Passacaglia (Copland, 2002). It is also closely related to the music with basso continuo, and theme and variation form. The fundamental structure of all these forms rely on the continual repetition of a melodic or harmonic pattern, which become the basis for various developments throughout the course of the music.

Among the other traditional musical forms, passacaglia form has been widely used and known by many composers since the emergence of the form. This is mostly because the characteristic of the form that allows endless variation over a theme and can be interpreted in various ways, accommodating various composers across musical periods to develop their creative and innovative approaches. However, it seems that this form has been less used in recent time. Perhaps, this is due to the difficulties of avoiding the trap of anachronism (old-fashioned and outdated approach) that might limit musical innovation and invention.

I believe that creativity and originality are not necessarily related to the innovation and invention. Rather, creative and innovative way of composing can be found by rediscovering the musical legacy of the past, that still offers many undiscovered possibilities in recent time (Griffith, 2010). Therefore, this research attempts to describe my approach in bringing the aspect of creativity and originality into my composition *Passacaglia*. The research is expected to stimulate various creative and innovative compositional processes that can transform a traditional musical form into contemporary context, through analytical observations towards various composer's approaches and individual exploration. The discussion and analysis of Passacaglia will demonstrate my approach to select, transform, and to a further extent, depart from the existing approaches toward the form.

Research method

This research is primarily conducted with practice-based research, which involves creative practice as the result of investigations toward research questions and problems (Sullivan, 2009, p.48). The research outcome from this research helps inventing new ideas or expanding the existing knowledge (Niedeerer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007, p. 10). The researcher will use the compositional process of creating music with passacaglia form, to explore the relation between contemporary and traditional context within the form itself.

The research is also conducted with qualitative method that emphasize on analysis descriptive approach. Qualitative approach may employ multiple types of theoretical perspectives and research strategies through various approaches to address specific issue that cannot be measured, such as explaining meaning or phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). The use of descriptive qualitative might be applied in various settings to capture the depth, complexity, and richness of a phenomenon (Regionel, 2023).

The approach used in this research will focus on analyzing data in two stages. First, by analyzing various representative passacaglia music throughout different eras and describing the innovative qualities in their time, and secondly, by analyzing the application and transformation of the idea in the first stage analysis into the compositional process of the researcher's music *Passacaglia.*

The use of passacaglia form by various composers

Henry Purcell's aria "When I am laid in earth" from *Dido and Aeneas* (1698) is one of the earliest Baroque music that represents the 'traditional' passacaglia form, using simple triple meter in minor key signature. Despite its typical form, the use of chromatic melodic theme – known as the Dido's Lament – was quite striking and unusual during that period. The unusual melodic motion effectively helps suggesting the idea of melancholy and uneasiness in the lamentation, due to obscure harmonic progress in the chromatic motion. The emotion is also intensified by the constant repetition of the theme.



Figure 1. "Dido's Lament" theme.

The last movement of Brahms's *Fourth Symphony* also demonstrate the composer's attempt to extent and rediscover the musical form and material of his predecessors, as it can be related with the Bach's Cantata no. 150, Buxtehude's *Chaconne*, or even Beethoven's *C Minor Variations* (Knapp, 1989). The theme, though repeated continuously as in common passacaglia form, also appears in various unconventional ways. The variations of the repeated theme occur in more seemingly unstructured manner to suggest a more organic development. The theme starts in the top voice (rather than in the bass line), which is rather unusual before his time. The unusual appearances of the theme also happen in the following parts, as the theme might shift to the bass line (bars 33 - 40), break into different musical lines (bars 81 - 88), or it is rhythmically shifted from the first beat of the bar (bars 57 - 64).

In some cases, the theme is far less perceptible due to more complex deconstruction processes. For example, in bar 71-72, the supposed notes B and E of the theme are changed into notes E and A. This is perhaps disputable, as those notes B and E can be found in viola and violin 1 respectively. However, they seem insignificant and rather unconnected from the flow of the theme. The following development in bar 89 - 86 demonstrates further the deformation of the theme. For example, some of the initial theme's notes are missing or displaced to other less significant musical lines, which are hardly traceable compared to its first exposition. This compositional process has been adopted by following successors, such as Anton Webern in his post-romantic orchestral music *Passacaglia op. 1*.

Looking to a more recent context, Gyorgy Ligeti's *Passacaglia Ungherese* demonstrates significant alterations from the traditional features of passacaglia form, such as the use of 4/2 meter and some pseudo-major chords succession. Despite the less affinity to the typical passacaglia form, the music still pertains some fundamental principal of the form, where the repeated theme becomes the underlying skeleton of the structure. However, its exposition is presented in canon texture rather than as a single line melody.



Figure 2. Theme exposition of Ligeti's *Passacaglia Ungherese.*

In his other work *Hungarian Rock*, the use of passacaglia form is also quite explicit, as it is clearly stated in the score as Chaconne (the alternative term for Passacaglia). However, the significant change from traditional passacaglia form is underlined through unconventional use of 9/8 meter and four-bar chord progression as a theme.

The remarkable compositional process happens at the final section of the music, where the repeating chords progressions break away. The continuous rhythmical chords progression transforms into a less rhythmical patterns, and the harmonic theme that holds the composition's structure dissolve into different harmonic motion. Despite the changes, the character of the initial harmonic progression still presents to the end of the music. From deeper perspective, this phenomenon raises up question to the importance of the theme, in terms of its role, definition, and existence in passacaglia form.



Figure 3. Theme exposition of Ligeti's *Hungarian Rock.*



Figure 4. The final section's entry of Ligeti's *Hungarian Rock*.

Matius Shanboone's Passacaglia Compositional Process Analysis

A. Theme

The choice of theme plays the most important part in my initial step of composing. In order to bring element in the past into recent context, I use the idea that Dora Hanninen (2003), a music psychologist, described as the concept of recontextualization. It is the process of reshaping and distorting the 'known' musical object through various treatment of repetition, in order to bring familiar thing in different light. Therefore, I decided to use the *Westminster Tunes* as the theme, which is familiar enough for many listeners.



Figure 5. The ostinato theme from the fragment of 'Westminster Chimes' tune.

However, the simplicity of the melody is also brought into different context by my idea of distortion through repetition, in which repetition in music is capable of shaping and manipulating our perception to recognise various musical forms and structures (Boone, 2021). By this concept, the exposition of the theme in my Passacaglia follows the theme's original pitch order as shown in Figure 5. However, the pitches are displaced to various registers and instruments, which makes the connection to its original melody is less – even hardly – perceivable, and only through multiple and analytic hearing, it can be traced quite directly.

At the same time, I also try to expand the function of the theme. In common, the ground theme dictates the harmonic progression as we seen in *Dido's Lament* or Brahms's *Passacaglia*. However, the theme in this music does not only govern the melodic and chord progressions, but also the musical sections and its instrumentations following the order of the appearance of each note of the theme, as shown in this table:

Bar number of the beginning pitches	**Character/Instrumentation of the ostinato pitches**	**Bar number of the related sections**	**Characteristic of the dominating instruments in the related sections**
1	Soft, sustained, metallic / Harp and violin	8-21	Vibraphone and harp sustained chords, sustained notes of woodwinds
2	Louder dynamic, sharp articulation / Violoncello pizzicato	22-35	Xylophone attacks
3 and 4	Increasing dynamic (*cresc.*) followed by strong accents / Brass and Gran Cassa, articulated with contrabass pizzicato	36-84	Increasing dynamic of strings toward brass and non-pitched percussions attacks
5	Strong attack along with sustained notes / Harp and violin	71-84	Xylophone attacks and strings sustained notes
6	Short and strong attack / Flute	85-139	Short and sharp rhythmical attacks of woodwinds, followed by the rest of instruments
7	Soft dynamic (as bridge to the following section) / Clarinet	132-139	Softer dynamic and texture, dominated by woodwinds

Figure 6. Table of the characters of the ostinato pitches related to each musical sections.

B. Harmonic combination

To create unusual harmonic colour, I attempt to use tonal harmony in different way rather than avoiding it, as can be seen for example in bars 8-15. The superimposition of two different tonal chords creates a new colour that both maintain and loosen the connection with the classic tonality, for example, the chord in bar 8 were constructed from combination of D and G major, bar 9 from a minor and E major, and bar 10 from Eb and D major.



Figure 7. The harmonic progression in bars 8-14 of *Passacaglia*

The parallel motion of the chord progressions also consists of superimposition of the themes in various lines, as the original theme in the third lines accompanied by its imitation in F# major, D major, Eb major, and Bb major from top to bottom. This musical outcome relates with the compositional process in Ligeti's *Passacaglia Ungherese*, in which the presence of the original theme seems blurred. Some slight alterations to the harmonic progression were also made to create a more organic musical flow.

C. Thematic transformation

The deconstruction of the theme happens right from the onset of the piece through several levels, becoming less and less imperceptible up to the point where it dissolved and untraceable. The initial stage begins by spreading the register of the main theme, each assigned to a particular timbre as mentioned before in subchapter V.2. The superimposition of themes in various transpositions follows the exposition, distorts further the perception of the exposition theme in bar 8-15 as discussed in subchapter V.3. In bar 36, both fragmentation and superimposition of the theme develop to further extremes. The pitches of the theme are scattered in various register, often appearing as harmonic coloration rather than part of melodical line, which refers to Brahms's *Passacaglia*. Its presence is also highly disrupted by superimposition of themes in various form, such as the theme in two-bar units, three-bar units, or theme starting in bar 40. Moreover, the underlying theme is imperceptibly disappearing as the steady repetitive chordal accents in the surface layer become more prominent through the acceleration of tempo.

D. Time signature

The use of triple meter in this music does not directly correspond to that of common passacaglia form. The musical events – chordal attacks – mostly appears in the first beat without sense of strong and weak beat, and therefore do not provide clear hint to a particular meter. The melodical lines, i.e. bar 22-35 also hardly suggest the sense of triple meter as they often start and stop on weak beats. The irregular accentuations also help concealing the pulsation of the triple meter. The changes to 5/8 meter, as in bar 96, destabilise further the regularity of the meter in later part of the music.

Conclusion

The compositional process of my composition *Passacaglia* develops from three aspects: the features of early passacaglia form, the compositional process of passacaglia form used by composers across various musical periods, and my own approach. There are features that are strongly related to the 'traditional' Passacaglia, for example, the exposition of a 'melodic' theme, the use of simple triple meter, and the tonal harmonic elements. The influence from other composers can be seen by the extreme manipulation and distortion of the theme's repetition, the unusual harmonic progression, and the distorted sense of triple time. My personal approach to the form appears on how I use the theme not just as a skeleton for the microstructure (harmonic/melodic progression), but also for the macrostructure (musical sections). The use of tonal element in non-tonal construction also gives new perspectives toward the harmonic color and progression. The deconstruction process of the theme happens in a more extreme way, so that it is hardly traceable from the beginning.

The research demonstrates how the use of traditional form could be a potential opportunity in composing contemporary music. Musical form does not merely belongs to a particular time and places, but it evolves from time to time as shown by different attempts from various composers across different time and places. The creative way can appear by looking into the root of musical form, examining existing various approaches throughout various periods, and developing individual methods. Therefore, I hope, the discussion and analysis can offer some new perspectives among various attempts that have been made to deal with established musical forms. In a greater perspective, I hope the composition and this analysis can enrich the knowledge for the future composer in developing musical form, which always organically evolve through time.

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