

## **“PASSACAGLIA” IN THE OPERA OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY. THE INTERLUDE NO.4 FROM THE OPERA “PETER GRIMES” BY BENJAMIN BRITTEN**

**GABRIELA COCA<sup>1</sup>**

**SUMMARY.** In the assembly of the opera, *Passacaglia* represents an isle, in the same way in which the isle exists in the sea. Because of the fact that it is situated in the middle of the two scenes of this one, by the central position, it realizes the symmetric cut of the opera. On the podium, we can meet it as an independent work. Musical-dramatic, *Passacaglia*, by *basso ostinato* and by the variations which are going on this sound basement, materialized the persistence of the fix idea in the mind of the main character. This study shows the structural and dramaturgical analysis of this part of the opera entitled *Peter Grimes*.

**Keywords:** Passacaglia, Benjamin Britten, opera, Peter Grimes, structure, musical-dramaturgy, analysis, basso ostinato, interlude

From the thirteen opera of Benjamin Britten, “*Peter Grimes*”, op.33, which he had composed in the last years of the World War II represents one of the most played and known works of him of this type.

**Ex. 1**

The action of the opera is taking place around the 1830. The main character, Peter Grimes is a fisherman renegade by his fellows and by the community he lives in. After the mysterious death of his young apprentice, Grimes is judged, but he cannot be condemned by the law. He is just given reproaches. With the help of the old captain Balstrode and of the teacher Ellen Orford, Grimes receives a new child as an apprentice. His brutal behavior does not change, he treats this new apprentice in an inhuman way.

The whole village revolts against him.



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Grimes listens nobody, not even his beloved Ellen. He rejects her brutally, everybody can see the fact. In a stormy night, his apprentice, under the hard burden of the fishing tools slides away from the high cliff where was the cottage of the fisherman and he dies. Being followed by the crowd, Peter Grimes is driven mad. At the calm and severe suggestion of the captain Balstrode, Grimes goes away with his boat and he sinks it. After his death, the life passes monotonously, in its own rhythm.

The character, Peter Grimes, in Britten's vision, is a lonely man, one who worths to be sympathized, who, in his impotence of the soul, by bad means, fights for a better life.

Analyzing his inner state, the psychical state of the character, we notice that he is consumed by the steady idea of earning money, and, by it, to gain power and honor, the inner calmness and Ellen's love. Being possessed by this fix idea, he loses the control of his own personality and that of his own actions. A good background for this state is offered by his pride, his vanity, his ambition. We quote from the small book: *if I shall be rich, Ellen will be mine*. By this thing he looks for a motivation for his brutal, instinctual manifestations, finding the justification of his steady idea in that fight for high ends: the happiness, the love, the peoples' recognition.

Three years ago, in the symposium *The Vocal Art in All its Variants*, organized at the "Gh. Dima" Music Academy, Cluj-Napoca, I presented the paper: *The Sea—Symbol and Dramatic Illustrative Effect in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Opera*(Benjamin Britten: "Peter Grimes")

Now, why *Passacaglia*?

In the assembly of the opera, *Passacaglia* represents an isle, in the same way in which the isle exists in the sea. Because of the fact that it is situated in the middle of the two scenes of this one, by the central position, it realizes the symmetric cut of the opera.(On the podium, we can meet it as an independent work.)

Musical-dramatic, *Passacaglia*, by *basso ostinato* and by the variations which are going on this sound basement, materialized the persistence of the fix idea in the mind of the main character.

Peter Grimes, in his desperation, unknowing how to react to the smooth and sad words of Ellen, he pushed her, throwing her at the ground. From the musical motif that sustained his words: *It did happen! The curse of the heavens had fallen on me!* comes forth the theme of *Passacaglia*.

## Ex. 2

Peter Grimes

So be it, - And God have mercy on me!

So, from a dramatic point of view, *Passacaglia* is motivated. The theme that keeps on repeating as **basso ostinato** in its frame appears with no less than **455 measures before the main *Passacaglia***.

The theme played for the first time by Peter Grimes is sustained simultaneously by the woodwind instruments compartment and that of the bowed stringed instruments what plays in *fff* the same theme, harmonized eventually it has been taken and it is rhythmically varied by the brass wired instruments and, then, by the vocal parties. Some examples of these apparitions:

**Ex. 3**

a) Mrs. Sedley *con forza*

Mal treat ing that poor boy a gain!

b) Fl., Picc., Ob., Cl., Vl. I., Vl. II., Vla, Vc.

c) Ob., Bsn., Vla., Db.

d) Auntie, Boles, Keene

*f* *cresc.*

Grimes is at his ex er cise.

e) Chorus

*f*

Grimes is at his ex er cise.

f) Vla., Vc.

*pp*

etc.

g)

Boles *ff* >

Speak out in the name of the Lord!

Detailed description: This is a vocal line in G major, 4/4 time. It begins with a quarter note G4, followed by a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The next measure contains a dotted half note G4. The final measure contains a quarter note G4. The piece concludes with a 3/2 time signature change and a quarter note G4.

In an equilibrium reason, *Passacaglia*, in the same way in which it has its “antecedents”, has its subsequent echo. Some motifs from the variations of *Passacaglia* reappear in the scene that takes place in the fisherman’s cottage, between Grimes and his new apprentice.

Ex. 4

a)

Peter G. *p molto legato*

You sit there watching me And you're the cause of every thing Your eyes, like his are watching me With an idiot's drooling gaze!

Detailed description: This is a vocal line in G major, 4/4 time. It consists of a single melodic line with various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The lyrics are written below the notes.

b)

Harp

*pres de la table*

*pp poco marcato*

*cresc.*

*sf*

Detailed description: This is a harp accompaniment in G major, 4/4 time. The right hand is mostly silent, with a few chords. The left hand plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, starting with a piano (*pp*) and *poco marcato* dynamic, and ending with a fortissimo (*sf*) dynamic after a crescendo (*cresc.*).

c)

Bsn., Cl. in A

*pp espress.*

*pp espress.*

*pp*

*pp*

*cresc.*

*f*

Detailed description: This is a woodwind part in A major, 4/4 time. The bassoon and clarinet play a melodic line with various dynamics, including piano (*pp*) and *espress.* (expressive), and a fortissimo (*f*) dynamic. The part includes a crescendo (*cresc.*) and a final fortissimo (*f*) dynamic.

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Britten solves in here, with a great dramatical sense, the death of the child. After the fall, after his cry, the feeling of the stillness of the silence is made by a solo motif, arpeggiato ostinato in *pianissimo* voix céleste.

Ex. 5

The boy

portamento lento (scream)

(bis bigliando)

Cel.

sempre *pp*

Ex. 6

Benjamin Britten: "Peter Grimes"-Interludiu 4.-Passacaglia -Orchestra

ORCHESTRA

1. CECILIA

2. LINES

3. SOPI

4. ANGLAIS

5. VIOLETTA

6. PASSAGLIA

7. PRINS

8. FUMETS

9. BOBONES

10. VSA

11. HPAI

12. ELLETA

13. FASO

14. IN 2

15. IN 1

16. ONCELO

17. DOUBLE BASS

18. LARINETS

19. OLD VIOIN

20. LO DOUBLE BASS

21. CRYSTAL

22. SILVE BRID

23. BASS DRUM

24. TRAMP

25. TABLS

TEMPO

1. Andante moderato (sempre un poco rubato)

2. animato

3. sedenuto (quasi tempo I)

4. poco a poco più mosso

5. sempre con moto

6. con moto

7. con slancio

8. stringendo

9. stringendo

10. stringendo

11. stringendo

TEMPO VAR. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11.

5m 13mās. 12m 8m 4m 14m 9m 5m 8m 6m 10m 11m

INSTRUMENTA

1. CECILIA

2. LINES

3. SOPI

4. ANGLAIS

5. VIOLETTA

6. PASSAGLIA

7. PRINS

8. FUMETS

9. BOBONES

10. VSA

11. HPAI

12. ELLETA

13. FASO

14. IN 2

15. IN 1

16. ONCELO

17. DOUBLE BASS

18. LARINETS

19. OLD VIOIN

20. LO DOUBLE BASS

21. CRYSTAL

22. SILVE BRID

23. BASS DRUM

24. TRAMP

25. TABLS

The coloured graph of the orchestration

“*Passacaglia*” contains 106 measures, and it includes the theme plus 11 variations. On this itinerary, Britten conducts the energetic of the musical discourse towards the final culminating point. (variation11).

Following the colored graphic of the orchestration, we can distinguish in this amplifying process three main orchestral sonorous blocks:

- 1) measures 1 - 38 (theme + variation 1-3) = 38 measures.
- 2) measures 39 - 63 (variations 4 - 5) = 25 measures.
- 3) measures 64 -107 (variations 6 - 11) = 43 measures.

In this context, variation 5 is highlighted by its central position, and by its extension : 14 measures. The rest of the variations are shorter. Also, here, Britten impose an accelerating step to the tempo: *poco a poco più moto*.

In the same way as the evolution of basso ostinato takes place in the block form, the beginning and the end of the variations are the demarcation lines, the orchestration is realized under the blocks form, each variation using other instrumental combinations. The more often variations are the numbers 3, 9, 10 and 11.

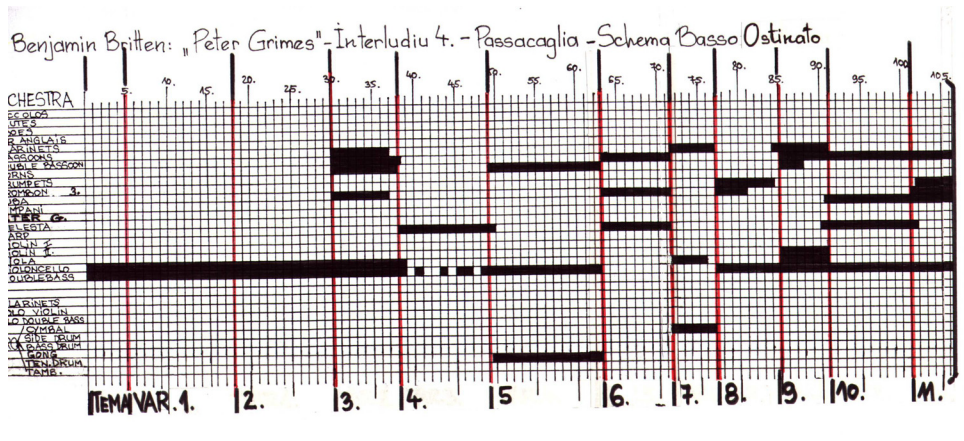
**In a dynamic plan**, we notice the same gradual density as it is in the plan of the orchestration. So, the variations, 9, 10, 11 use *the fortissimo* sound intensity constantly, the end of the variation 11 touches *the fortissimo possible*, the culminating point of the entire interlude.

**Basso ostinato** of *Passacaglia* is realized by the continuous resumption of the following melodic, motif:

**Ex. 7**

In here, there is the succession of a descendent: an arpeggio which outlines a diminished chord and a perfect fifth, tied in an ascendant semitone! The mathematical logic of the motif: from the sum of the first three intervallic distances results the fourth one. By a rhythmic point of view, we notice that the quarter-note rest of the motif are distributed in a progressive way, shaping a rhythmic progression. At the beginning, it appears after an eighth-note rest, then, after two eighths and two rests and then, after three eighths and three rests of eighths, after which, in the end, Britten rounds the progression, coming back to the formula 1, so, an eighth and a rest of an eighth.

Ex. 8



The sketch of the basso ostinato

By the repartition of the instruments of basso obstinato it can be seen clearly, the structure of *Passacaglia* on 11 variations(see the red lines from the graphic). We can notice in this frame the fact that Britten does not use identical combinations which plays basso ostinato, only in the variations 1 and 2, here, the ostinato is played by violoncello and contrabass. The rest, Britten, in each variation uses combinations for the tuning of the bass.

**The melodic profile** of the variations has as a basement the combinations of the intervals that compose the basso ostinato and the inversion of these intervals.

Ex. 9



By using the chromatic element, Britten enlarges the qualitative area of these intervals. Each variation at its turn, is remarking itself by a special rhythmical profile.

In order to enter a little into the logic of the construction of Britten in *Passacaglia* let's look at the first variations.

**Ex. 10**

**a (5 măsuri)**

**av1 (4 măsuri)**

**av2 (4 măsuri)**

The melodic, of an ambitus of three octaves, is structuring on a tripodic musical period, made by three phrases (**a+ av1 + av2**) (5+4+4 measures). Each phrase starts with an ascending intervallic leap, respectively, the perfect fifth, major seventh and a perfect octave. The phrases has an anacrusic character. The rhythm knows a gradual density.

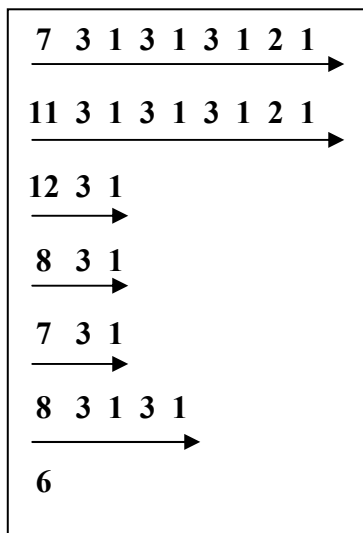
**Ex. 11**

By the intervallic analyses of the melodic profile, we notice that Britten uses the scale which are distanced with the model 3:1 and 2:1, in the first period of the melody, we put together two scales of an identical structure being differentiated by a leap of 11 distance (major seventh). In the third phase of the melody, the leaps intervene each the interval distance.

The scheme of the models is presenting as it follows:



Ex. 12



The development tempo of the variations 1 is *Andante moderato* (*sempre un poco rubato*).

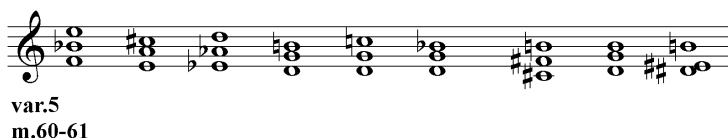
In his **harmonic** language, Britten seldom uses chords that belong to the non-gravitational harmonic system (the geometrical one). So, we can find structures like:

Ex. 13

Var.4,m.41..... m.46    Var.5 m.53    m.54,55    m. 59  
 Var.5,m.57..... m.50

do delta    sol delta    fa delta    mib delta    sib delta    etc.

Also, the non-gravitational chords, can be met alternating the tonal minor with major ones, forming scales with harmonically models( in here, chords epsilon and delta with minor chorda).



Britten is, in the first place, a lyrical composer, in the musical-dramatic field, giving a great importance to the melody. However, he did not neglect the context in which the melody is developed. He is remarked by the lack of the musical means he uses. Among the characteristics of his composer style we can tell about: bitonality, bimodality, polimodality, often insiense, rhythm ostinato, from where there comes a complete special atmosphere.

Translated from Romanian by Maria Cozma

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