The Influence of Handel’s Passacaglia from Keyboard Suite No. 7 HWV 432 on Halvorsen’s Passacaglia in G minor for Violin and Viola

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George Frideric Handel’s Passacaglia from Keyboard Suite No. 7 HWV 432 comprises sixteen variations over a groundbass (a bassline that is continually repeated throughout a composition). Johan Halvorsen’s Passacaglia in G minor for Violin and Viola is based off of Handel’s Passacaglia. Halvorsen uses the same groundbass and similar opening variations, but presents extended techniques for string instruments to create his own virtuosic set of variations. Given that Halvorsen’s Passacaglia is derived from a work by another composer, is Halvorsen’s composition just an extension of Handel’s work or can it be considered an original composition?

My paper compares the motives and analytical shape diagrams of Handel’s first three variations to Halvorsen’s first three variations. I will also discuss the evolution of Halvorsen’s variations throughout the piece, including discourse on the four-bar phrase, repeats, tempo changes, and extended techniques of the string instruments. This discussion will explain and clarify details of my shape diagram of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia. While it is important to note that the groundbass and opening variations of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia derive from Handel, I argue that Halvorsen’s work is sustainable on its own merit because of its independent evolution starting in variation four. Additionally, Halvorsen’s work contains modern features, such as tempo changes and extended instrumental techniques, which set Halvorsen’s work apart from his predecessor’s, and which distinguish Halvorsen’s piece as a masterpiece of the early 21st century.

George Frideric Handel’s Keyboard Suite No. 7 HWV 432 (1720) is a set of baroque instrumental compositions consisting six movements. The last movement, Passacaglia, comprises sixteen variations over a groundbass (a bassline that is continually repeated throughout a composition). Johan Halvorsen’s Passacaglia in G minor for Violin and Viola (1893) is based off of Handel’s Passacaglia. Halvorsen uses the same groundbass and similar opening variations, but presents extended techniques for string instruments to create his own virtuosic set of variations. Given that Halvorsen’s Passacaglia is derived from a work by another composer, is Halvorsen’s composition just an extension of Handel’s work or can it be considered an original composition?

My paper compares the motives and analytical shape diagrams of Handel’s first three variations to Halvorsen’s first three variations. I will also discuss the evolution of Halvorsen’s variations throughout the piece, including discourse on the four-bar phrase, repeats, tempo changes, and extended techniques for string instruments. This discussion will assist the formulation and explanation my shape diagram of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia.

The openings of the Passacaglias introduce the original theme and groundbass, which the variations are centered off of (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). The violin part (the upper staff of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia) duplicates exactly the motives of the right hand of the harpsichord (the
upper staff of Handel’s Passacaglia). The viola part (the lower staff of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia) incorporates the harpsichord’s bass voice, or lowest note of each chord, in the left hand (the lower staff Handel’s Passacaglia) to emphasize the groundbass for the original theme.

Figure 1.1 – Handel Original Theme

Figure 1.2 – Halvorsen Original Theme

In the first variations (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2), the violin part follows the upper two voices of the right hand of the harpsichord. This violin part also follows a similar contour of the original theme. The viola part follows the left hand of the harpsichord, but switches octaves to facilitate smooth voice leading as well as follow the contour of the groundbass in the original theme.

Figure 2.1 – Handel Variation 1

Figure 2.2 – Halvorsen Variation 1
In the second variations (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2), the violin part is the same as the right hand of the harpsichord. The viola part is the same as the left hand of the harpsichord, but pitched an octave lower to create a bass-like accompaniment. Also, both the violin and viola part have slurs edited into the parts for phrasing.

**Figure 3.1 – Handel Variation 2**

![Handel Variation 2](image)

**Figure 3.2 – Halvorsen Variation 2**

![Halvorsen Variation 2](image)

Lastly, in the third variations (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2), the violin part is the same as the right hand of the harpsichord, but adds octave changes and grace notes for added virtuosity. The viola part is the same as the left hand of the harpsichord. As in the third variation, the violin and viola parts have slurs edited into the parts for phrasing.

**Figure 4.1 – Handel Variation 3**

![Handel Variation 3](image)

**Figure 4.2 – Halvorsen Variation 3**

![Halvorsen Variation 3](image)
Since Halvorsen’s original theme and first three variations are so similar to Handel’s, the shape diagrams of these first four iterations of the groundbass are the same for both works (see Figure 5.1 and 6.1).

**Figure 5.1 – Shape Diagram of Original Theme and Variations 1-3**

![Shape Diagram of Original Theme and Variations 1-3](image)

**Figure 6.1 – Halvorsen Shape Diagram**

![Halvorsen Shape Diagram](image)

After the first three variations, however, Halvorsen’s variations evolve independently. This evolution is visually demonstrated in the Halvorsen Shape Diagram (see Figure 6.1). Starting with variation 4, each variation slowly accelerates through rhythm and tempo changes to variation 11. The tempo for variations 11 & 12 dramatically slows down to Andante, creating a decrease in thickness in the shape diagram. After the decrease in tempo the variations begin to accelerate again through rhythm and tempo changes in variations 13 through 18. During this acceleration, variations 15 and 17 contain small ornamented motives that are switched back and forth between the instruments without an accompaniment line. This creates a sound reduction during the performance, which I have noted by small dips in the shape diagram. Also, variations 16 through 18 contain extended techniques on the violin (ponticello, saltando, and large 32nd-note slurred runs) that contribute to the intensification of each variation. Variation 19 represents
the climax of the piece through tempo and rhythmic accelerando, after which variation 20 acts as a coda, performed in a distinctly slower tempo and ending on a G Major chord as a Picardy third.

One unique feature of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia is the use of tempo changes. Handel’s Passacaglia does not include any variation in tempo, while Halvorsen includes five distinct tempo changes and a stringendo (acceleration forward), as well as many ritardandos (gradual decreases in tempo) throughout the piece. These fluctuations in tempo begin in variation 11, with a drop from the original tempo, Largamente (quarter note=88), to Andante. The variations then accelerate gradually through tempo changes in variation 13 (Piu mosso), variation 18 (Molto energico), variation 19 (Allegro con fuoco including a stringendo at the end), and variation 20 (Adagio). The variability of tempo sets Halvorsen’s Passacaglia apart from Handel’s work.

Another distinction of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia is the use of extended techniques (unconventional methods of playing to obtain unusual sounds). For instance, he calls for ponticello (sliding the bow over the bridge) and artificial harmonics (pressing the left hand first finger, down while the fourth finger lightly touches the string) in variation 16. In variation 17, he calls for another extended technique, saltando (playing each note staccato in one motion, by bouncing the bow off the strings). Since extended techniques were not employed in classical music until the romantic era, their use sets the sound of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia distinctly apart from Handel’s work.

Since Handel’s four-bar groundbass is the basis of Halvorsen’s variations, deviations from the four-bar phrase are significant. One type of deviation involves the use of optional repeats, where the music is written as four bars enclosed by repeat signs. I use the term optional, since it is left to the performer’s discretion to follow the repeat. Variations 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, and 16 contain optional repeats that extend the variation from four bars to eight bars. Within this list, variations 12 and 16 specify timbre changes (dynamics and playing style) during the repeat, suggesting that the repeats are necessary and should be considered eight-bar variations. However, variations 12 and 16 are written as four bars enclosed by repeat signs, so they are still classified as optional repeats. For the sake of consistency, I have left the variations with optional repeats as four-bar variations in the shape diagram.

Another type of deviation from the four-bar phrase includes the use of required repeats, where the music is written as four bars with a duplicate four bars succeeding. I use the term required, since it is not possible for the performer to disregard the repeat without rearranging the composition. Variations 9, 13, 18, and 19 contain required repeats, resulting in eight-bar variations. Both variations 18 and 19 act as extended variations, since the eight-bar sections are eight-bar phrases rather than two four-bar phrases. Variations 9 and 13 specify timbre changes on the required repeats similar to variations 12 and 16, but it is not clear why Halvorsen put repeat signs on variations 12 and 16 while writing out variations 9 and 13. For the sake of clarity, I have extended the length of the required repeat variations in the shape diagram to show the difference in length of the eight-bar sections in comparison to the four-bar sections. Also, I have paired several variations in the shape diagram, and I have extended the length of these variations in the shape diagram to make them equivalent to two variations. These alterations in the shape diagram present a more accurate visual representation of the Halvorsen Passacaglia.
While it is important to note that the groundbass and opening variations of Halvorsen’s Passacaglia derive from Handel, I argue that Halvorsen’s work is sustainable on its own merit because of its independent evolution starting from variation four. Additionally, Halvorsen’s work contains distinctly modern features, such as tempo changes, extended techniques, and eight-bar sections that are unique to Halvorsen’s work in comparison to Handel, and distinguish Halvorsen’s piece as a masterpiece of the early 21st century.