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Passacaglia and lament in Ligeti's recent music¹

György Ligeti's music since his opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974-77, revised 1996) could be described as a collage of different compositional techniques. Two of the most prominent are passacaglia, and a melodic figure Ligeti calls the 'lament motive', based on the descending chromatic scale. Passacaglia and chromatic scales have appeared in Ligeti's music since his student days, but they have become especially prominent in his recent music. This essay examines the development of these two techniques, focusing on their combination in the Horn Trio and Violin Concerto. These works not only show us how Ligeti uses the same ideas in different contexts; they also provide an overview of his recent compositional technique.

Of the various compositional devices that appear in Ligeti's music since his opera *Le Grand Macabre* (1974-77), two of the most prominent are the passacaglia and a melodic figure Ligeti calls the 'lament motive', based on the descending chromatic scale. Table 1 shows a list of works from the opera to the late 1990s in which these techniques appear. This essay examines the two slow movements that combine them: the fourth movement of the Horn Trio, 'Lamento', from 1982, and the fourth movement of the Violin Concerto, 'Passacaglia: Lento intenso', written a decade later. While both movements have much in common, their differences also highlight how Ligeti's music has developed since he embarked on his new style in the early 1980s.

Table 1. Ligeti works since 1977 using passacaglia or lament motive.

Passacaglia or chaconne:

- Le Grand Macabre* (1974-77, revised 1996)
 - scene 3, Nekrotzar's entrance – Moderate
 - scene 4, finale – Andantino con moto
- Hungarian Rock* for harpsichord (1978) Vivacissimo molto ritmico
- Passacaglia Ungherese* for harpsichord (1978) Andante
- Nonsense Madrigals* IV, 'Flying Robert' (1988) Moderate
- Viola Sonata VI, 'Chaconne Chromatique' (1994) Vivace appassionato

Lament motive:

- Piano Etude 6, 'Automne à Varsovie' (1985) Presto cantabile, molto ritmico e flessibile
- Piano Concerto II, III (1985-88) Lento e deserto; Vivace cantabile
- Violin Concerto V, 'Appassionato' (1990-92) Agitato molto
- Viola Sonata V, 'Lamento' (1994) Tempo giusto, intenso e barbaro
- Hamburg Concerto VI, 'Capriccio' (1998-99)

Movements using both passacaglia and lament:

- Horn Trio IV, 'Lamento' (1982) Adagio
- Violin Concerto IV, 'Passacaglia' (1990-92) Lento intenso

Slow/fast movement pairs using passacaglia and/or lament:

- Piano Concerto II, III
- Violin Concerto IV, V
- Viola Sonata V, VI

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Chromatic scales, the basis of the lament motive, have been an essential part of Ligeti's music since his student days. What distinguishes the lament motive from the many chromatic shapes in other Ligeti works is its clear melodic profile, shown in Example 1. Many commentators have noticed that one of the hallmarks of the new style is its melodic directness. Richard Steinitz offers these observations on the motive:

1. It is a three-phrase melody, the third phrase of longer duration.
2. Each phrase descends stepwise in semitones and whole tones, interspersed with upward leaps.
3. Notes of greater expressive significance (e.g. immediately after the upward leaps) are intensified harmonically (in Example 1, these semitone harmonic intensifiers are marked with an asterisk).²



Example 1

The lament motive as it appears in the last movement of the Horn Trio (1982).

Passacaglia and lament have been linked in works since the 'Crucifixus' from Bach's B minor Mass and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. Ligeti follows this tradition, citing Dido's lament along with two Monteverdi madrigals, 'Zefiro torna' and 'Lamento della ninfa', as inspirations for the Horn Trio's Lamento.³ Ligeti's passacaglia stems from the 'lopped horn-fifths' motto of the Trio's preceding three movements, shown in Example 2. Just by itself, this short motto manages to evoke the disturbing sense of 'neither tonal nor atonal' harmony that pervades the entire Trio; Gavin Thomas describes it as 'simultaneously [reinventing] conventional voice-leading while turning it on its head.'⁴ The central tritone is approached and left by similar motion, contradicting traditional voice-leading practice in which the tritone resolves in contrary motion. Also, the last interval's upward displacement distorts its relation to the first interval; instead of a third and sixth forming an octave complement, the outer interval is a dissonant major seventh. This harmonic style, combining consonant intervals in non-tonal succession, also forms the basis of the closing passacaglia of *Le Grand Macabre*.⁵

To create the passacaglia ground for the Horn Trio's last movement, Ligeti alters the first interval to a minor third, then appends a perfect fifth and major third to make a five-interval cycle. Here is Ligeti's description of the movement's progress:

'A five-bar harmonic pattern (a variation of the horn-fifths cell) provides the framework around which descending chromatic figures increasingly become intertwined, until eventually the five chords are completely overgrown. During this escalation, the piano undergoes a trans-

2 Richard Steinitz, *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination*, London 2003, p. 294. For more analysis of works using the lament motive, see also Stephen Taylor, *The Lamento Motif: Metamorphosis in Ligeti's Late Style*, D.M.A. dissertation, Cornell University 1994.

3 In a conversation with Ulrich Dibelius quoted in Dibelius, 'Ligeti's Horn Trio', in: *Melos* 46 (1984) 1, p. 57.

4 Gavin Thomas, 'New times, new clocks', in: *Musical Times* July 1993, pp. 376-79. See also Mike Seaby, 'Ligeti's "third way": "non-atonal" elements in the Horn Trio', in: *Tempo* 216 (2001), pp. 17-22.

5 Discussed in depth in Jonathan Bernard, 'Ligeti's restoration of interval and its significance for his later works', in: *Music Theory Spectrum* 21 (1999) 1, pp. 1-31.

a) M3 P5 m6

b) M3 TT m6

c) m3 TT m6 P5 M3

Example 2

- a) Traditional horn fifths;
- b) Ligeti's 'lopsided' version, the motto of the Horn Trio;
- c) An extended version of the motto forms the passacaglia ground for the last movement, 'Lamento'.

formation, ultimately emerging as a gigantic imaginary drum, whose echo can be heard in the pedal tones of the horn. A strangely altered reminiscence of the horn-fifths cell appears in the piano and violin, like the photograph of a landscape which in the meantime has dissipated into nothingness.⁶

Example 3, an analytical sketch of the entire movement, shows the repeating five-chord passacaglia cycle, marked by dotted barlines. Passacaglia dyads (one chord per bar, so there is only one barline for every five measures in the actual score) are represented by filled-in black notes, while extra tones, for example the sustained B \natural at the beginning, are white. The descending lament melodies appear in the two upper staves, usually in three phrases marked a, b and c. (Rhythms are sometimes approximate, especially for long sustained tones.)

At the start of the second passacaglia cycle the piano plays the lament motive, comprising three phrases a, b, and c (Example 3, bar 6). The melody works against the passacaglia's E minor triad by starting on an appoggiatura F, which we would expect to resolve to E, the 'tonic'. The melody skips E though, dropping to E \flat , and then D. Throughout the piece the lament melody misses its consonant resolution, falling instead to another dissonance and continuing downward. The recurring, missed resolution contributes to the feeling of grief and loss that pervades the movement. As Richard Steinitz comments, 'The aura of tragic grandeur has the stamp of Beethoven, but its pessimism is Ligeti's – no facile post-modernist breast-beating, but a deepening and darkening of his art which he could not escape.'⁷

The violin's response begins partway through the third cycle, on the A \flat minor triad in bar 14. The effect is like suddenly modulating to a new key, although again, the violin's melody does not resolve to the underlying A \flat minor harmony. From here on the phrases grow more intertwined, interrupting each other (bar 19) and accelerating through diminution (bar 30) so that their individual identities as three separate phrases are eventually subsumed into descending cascades.

6 György Ligeti, liner notes for Erato Compact Disc ECD 75555, trans. Sid McLauchlan (1990), p. 22.

7 Steinitz, p. 260.

PASSACAGLIA AND LAMENT IN LIGETI'S RECENT MUSIC

bar 1 $\text{♩} = 78$

6 11 14 16 19 21 24

violin

piano

horn sustains B \flat

violin

(piano)

III

IV

V

Passacaglia cycle:
(each passacaglia dyad = 1 bar)

26 31 34 36

a b c

muted horn sustains violin's C \sharp

(c extension)

8 va 3

(c extension, diminution)

Ab Lydian

G Lydian

VI

VII

VIII

8 va

Example 3

Ligeti, Horn Trio, 4th movement: Analytical sketch.

41 violin & piano diminutions continue to accelerate

46 horn lament, natural harmonics

51 horn & violin

56 horn & violin

IX X XI XII

61 (horn & violin continue, harmonized in tritones)

66

77

78 CODA

87

94

96

106

XIII XIV

passacaglia dissolves

3:5 polyrhythm

(mid-register lament continues)

4:5 polyrhythm in bass—gigantic imaginary drum

piano lament, built from passacaglia pitches

(violin melody implies 4th dyad) A Lydian

Example 3 (continued)

Meanwhile, the passacaglia spirals downward through invertible counterpoint, jumping up to the middle register again at the fifth cycle (bar 21 – the invertible counterpoint technique is identical to that in the *Passacaglia ungherese* of 1978). The sustained B \sharp added to the passacaglia's first and second cycles is followed by low C for the fourth cycle, then B \flat for the fifth. These sustained tones affect the apparent 'tonality' of the passacaglia, especially when they occur in the bass. Starting with the fifth cycle other tones are added to the passacaglia dyads, and the registers of the passacaglia pitches begin to spread outward like a fan. In the sixth cycle the passacaglia appears as a slow lament in the bass, while midway through the seventh cycle the chords are doubled at the higher octave (bar 34).

This registral wedge shape contributes to a large-scale crescendo which reaches an intense plateau from bars 57-77, the entrance of the piano's 'gigantic imaginary drum'. Just before, in the eleventh passacaglia cycle (bar 51) the horn finally enters with its own mistuned lament, playing on natural harmonics. The twelfth cycle brings in the piano/drum playing every four beats against the passacaglia's five. The passacaglia dyads are accompanied by more and more pitches until they are finally overwhelmed, climbing beyond the highest register of the piano to gradually disappear.

The climax just before the coda is one of the most striking moments in the entire Trio: the piano/drum suddenly stops, revealing the horn and violin quietly sustaining a semitone separated by six octaves. This frozen registral chasm is the culmination of a process that begins in the middle register with the opening E minor triad. Together with the melodies' gradual acceleration and overall dynamic crescendo (from *pp* to *ffff+*), the crescendo wedge shape of the voice-leading contributes to the music's growing intensity.

As the coda begins, the violin's sustained B \sharp turns into an extremely high, slow-motion lament, spanning nine bars (78-87). The absence of any other rhythmic activity creates a feeling of stasis. Like the violin's melody, the horn's pedal B \flat eventually descends to low A \flat , then G (virtually the lowest note on the instrument), continuing the descent from the piano's percussive, octave B \sharp 's (and perhaps making a last, incomplete, very slow lament).

Finally, the piano's entrance at bar 87 combines the lament with the passacaglia dyads themselves, as shown by the larger notes in Example 3. In bar 96 the violin's last wisp of melody fills in part of the passacaglia. The final two piano chords are emotionally ambiguous: the penultimate chord, a starkly tragic G minor (the end of the 5-chord passacaglia cycle), is followed by an A Lydian cluster breaking through like a ray of light (its top E combined with the horn's low G could be heard as starting the passacaglia cycle over again). This moment is prefigured in bars 34-35, when the piano, after a descending bass lament, suddenly plays E \flat over four octaves, followed by Lydian clusters on A \flat and G. This gesture, compressed at the end to just two chords, evokes feelings of reminiscence and loss, or as Ligeti describes it above, 'the photograph of a landscape which in the meantime has dissipated into nothingness.'⁸

The fourth movement of the Violin Concerto begins in this same distanced, motionless world, 'a glassy dreamscape' (to borrow another of Ligeti's images).⁹ As shown in Example 4, again the violin plays a slow-motion, descending melody in three phrases, very much like the Horn Trio's coda. But instead of total stasis, the accompaniment is now a new passacaglia, which despite sharing some obvious similarities with the Horn

8 György Ligeti, liner notes for ECD 75555, p. 22.

9 Constantin Floros, *György Ligeti: Jenseits von Avantgarde und Postmoderne*, Vienna 1996, pp. 224-25.

Trio, shows some important differences. As in the Horn Trio analysis in Example 3, passacaglia pitches are shown by black notes.

The Concerto's passacaglia, unlike the Trio's, has a built-in wedge shape, very similar to the opening of the much earlier *Omaggio a G. Frescobaldi*, adapted as the final movement of the *Musica ricercata* (1953). It consists of eleven pitches, with the twelfth pitch beginning the next cycle. The time signature is now 7/8, although the slightly faster tempo (M.M. 100) means that both movements have about the same (very slow) perceived tempo (later in the movement the meter changes often, but the passacaglia keeps changing every seven beats). There are six intervals per cycle instead of five: minor 2nd, minor 3rd, perfect 4th, perfect 5th, perfect 4th, minor 7th. The tritone is conspicuously absent. While the upper voice rises in an uninterrupted chromatic scale, the lower voice passes from B# to A, leaping upward in the fifth interval to recapture the missing Bb. This interrupted descent recalls the lament motive's third phrase, and gives some variety to the wedge shape, which would otherwise be perhaps too simple. Also, the first two intervals create the effect of a traditional 2-3 bass suspension. In the second cycle (bar 7), the sustained F in the bass makes a 7-6 suspension in the two passacaglia voices; in the third cycle (bar 13), the bass Eb creates a 4-3 suspension. These suspensions, though, are left by inexorable chromatic motion, creating again the disturbing sense of a traditional tonality that has lost its way, or as Paul Griffiths writes, that 'suggest[s] a world in which the features are recognizable but the rules are entirely altered. Moreover – and this only makes the alterations more disquieting – there is no sense of a desperate avant-garde flouting of tradition but rather a blank forgetting of how things used to be.'¹⁰

Instead of progressing downward through invertible counterpoint, the Concerto's passacaglia transposes itself up a perfect fourth each cycle – a 'circle of fifths' progression which reflects the preoccupation with open string tuning characteristic of the entire Concerto. There are fifteen cycles in all. The first five cycles each transpose up a perfect fourth, starting on middle C, F, Bb, Eb, and Ab (bar 25). The fifth cycle is only five bars long: it elides with the beginning of the sixth so that the passacaglia starts again on C (bar 30), but now two octaves higher.

A similar, more drastic elision occurs at the beginning of the eleventh cycle (bar 60), the *subito fff* climax. This chord contains the pitches from chords four and five of the previous cycle (perfect 5th Bb/Eb, perfect 4th Bb/Gb), as well as the next cycle's first interval, C/Bb – again starting over on C. The second chord (bar 61) contains the last interval of the previous cycle, C/D, as well as the next cycle's second interval, C/A. From here the passacaglia proceeds with no further disruptions until the end (despite a third elision in the 13th cycle, bar 76), where in a manner similar to the Horn Trio it climbs to the highest register – the piccolo's final pitch is the D above the piano's top C. But instead of fading away as it does in the Horn Trio, the passacaglia ends at the point of highest tension. The overall form is similar to the Horn Trio, but without the coda: instead the Concerto's final movement follows, *agitato molto* (Ligeti originally planned to end the Horn Trio with a fast movement following the Lamento as well).

While the analytical sketch of Example 4 emphasizes the passacaglia's motion, for much of the piece the passacaglia is more or less imperceptible. It forms a constantly sliding continuum, like a slow-motion glissando, which is violently interrupted and overwhelmed by the orchestra and soloist. Only when the melody pauses do we notice that the sustaining winds or strings have climbed higher than they were a few moments ago.

¹⁰ Griffiths, *György Ligeti*, London 1983, p. 106.

PASSACGLIA AND LAMENT IN LIGETI'S RECENT MUSIC

Bar [1] $\text{♩} = 100$

7 13 19 25

8^{va}

II III IV V

Passacaglia cycle:

30 36 40

8^{va}

(elision with previous cycle)

(Passacaglia octave transfer down)

3-note lament (bn, mar, cb)

VI VII VIII IX

42 44 51 54

8^{va}

Strings play clouds of harmonics above solo vn

'African' lament (ob, bn, tbn, tambourine)

Example 4
Ligeti, Violin Concerto, 4th movement: Analytical sketch.

The musical score is presented in three systems, labeled XII, XIII, and XIV. System XII (measures 57-75) features a vocal line with a melodic phrase starting at measure 60, marked with a fermata and the instruction "(elision with previous cycle)". The piano accompaniment includes a section marked "sub. *fff*" and "pp". System XIII (measures 76-114) begins with a "cearina entrance" at measure 76, followed by a melodic line with a fermata and the instruction "(elision with previous cycle)". The piano accompaniment includes a section marked "2nd 'super-whole-tone' interruption". The score concludes with measure 114. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics, and articulation marks.

Example 4 (continued)

Although the opening violin melody appears in three phrases, it does not sound much like the Horn Trio's lament: it is incredibly slow, and moves mostly in whole tones instead of semitones. The violent low string interruptions in bars 36, 41, and 72 also move mostly by whole tones, specifically the 'super-whole-tone' mode found in the last movements of the Piano and Violin Concertos as well as the seventh Piano Etude. Perhaps these whole-tone colors compensate for the total chromaticism of the passacaglia (see also the soloist's phrase at bar 58, harmonized with a high cello above; by way of contrast, the Viola Sonata's 'Lamento' is mostly diatonic).

As in the Horn Trio, the violin's melody accelerates by diminution, but now there is much more melodic variety. Fragments of the lament motive appear in only a few places. The first is a three-note interruption at the upbeat to bar 40 in the bassoon (on a high G, probably the highest note ever written for the instrument), marimba, and ultra-high double bass. This lament fragment seems to shock the solo violin out of its glacial melodies into a dialog with the orchestra, playing its own double-stopped laments (similar to the Viola Sonata's 5th movement, 'Lamento'). Soon follows a bizarre episode starting at bar 44 with oboe, muted trombone, bassoon and tambourine in an African rhythm, 12 beats divided into 5 + 7.¹¹

Many of the other melodies in the piece are derived from other movements in the Concerto, particularly the central third movement (which according to Ligeti's original plan was to have been the finale). These melodies in turn stem from the long-limbed string melodies in the first and third movements of the Piano Concerto, and may be traced even further back to the second movement of the Horn Trio and the second *Phantasie nach Hölderlin* for choir, 'Wenn aus der Ferne' (a good example is the melody beginning in bar 68, see Example 4).

Often the violin's melodies are accompanied by thick string chords, resembling a dense sonic spectrum. Some of these 'overtones' are played by the orchestra's scordatura violin and viola – tuned down a quarter-tone – which enhance the spectral effect. The first of these melodies begins in bar 49, in which the soloist plays at the bottom of the cloud of harmonics, like a sort of 'fundamental' to a weird, inharmonic spectrum. At the next entrance in bar 52, the violin is no longer the lowest pitch. In bar 63 the soloist has risen even higher through the dense, accompanying chords; by the end of the movement the soloist has emerged on top of the spectral cloud.

A sketch page for this movement published in the collection *Notenbilder: Kunstmappe*¹² shows some of Ligeti's changing musical conceptions. As is common in recent Ligeti sketches, different metrics are marked on the page by different colors.¹³ Prominent at the top of the page is a line of Xs in red, thus:

X X XX X X XX X XX X X XX X XX X X XX X XX X X XX X XX X X XX X X X

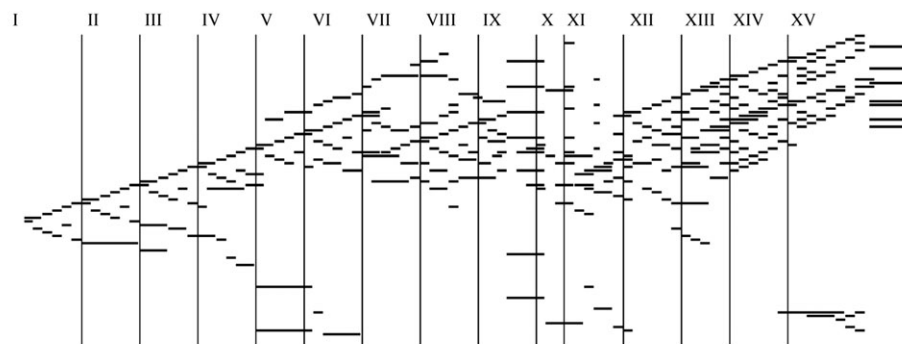
11 This example is also discussed in Stephen Taylor, 'Ligeti, Africa and Polyrhythm' in: *The World of Music* 45 (2003) 2, pp. 83-94.

12 Ligeti, *Notenbilder: Kunstmappe. Mit sechs Faksimiles nach Musik-Autographen und mit dem Reprint eines Ligeti-Portraits von Klaus Botiger*, Mainz 1993. This is a limited edition (300 autographed copies) of Ligeti sketches ranging from the *Requiem* to the *Violin Concerto*. One needs a full-color reproduction to do it justice; if possible the reader should refer to it for the following discussion.

13 Other sketches are reproduced in Ulrich Dibelius, *György Ligeti: eine Monographie in Essays*, Mainz 1994; and Constantin Floros, *György Ligeti*.

This is the African 5 + 7 rhythm referred to earlier; below these Xs is a version of the bizarre lament from bar 55. The rest of the page contains a draft for the passage from bars 54-81 (with slight discrepancies in bar numbers; Ligeti revised this movement after its premiere in 1990). In large letters Ligeti writes the following pitches: G, F (in green) and H (in red) – the bass line for the climax and passacaglia elision in bars 60-63. The crucial chord at bar 60 (bar 58 in the sketch) is already marked *fff*. This ‘overtone motive’, which occurs throughout the recent works, also appears as a vertical sonority just before, in bar 58 (see Example 4 – the F♯ is lowered to sound like a natural seventh).

To summarize, the Violin Concerto’s passacaglia gains from Ligeti’s experiences since composing the Horn Trio in 1982: specifically the metrical subtlety of African rhythms, the richness of harmonic spectra, and the melodic flowering that comes not only from the lament motive but also from the melodies of other 1980s works. At the same time, its reliance on the chromatic scale places it unmistakably with other Ligeti works. Example 5, a registral graph of the concerto’s passacaglia, looks like many other graphs of works from the *Musica ricercata* onward. Ligeti’s career could be seen as a giant amplification of that early work: just as it begins *tabula rasa* with only two pitches, progressing all the way to twelve, Ligeti’s work since his arrival in the West began by obliterating all the elements of music, then gradually reintroducing them one by one.¹⁴ The Violin Concerto comprises all the discoveries Ligeti has made in the intervening decades, while still relying on the chromaticism present in his earliest works.



Example 5

¹⁴ See Eric Austin Drott, *Agency and Impersonality in the Music of György Ligeti*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University 2001, pp. 364-83 for an interesting dissection of this ‘typical Ligeti narrative’.