



A Practical Guide To Improvising *a Chaconne or Passacaglia*



Do you wish to learn how to improvise a chaconne or passacaglia? This worksheet offers a comprehensive survey of the most common types of basses and how to adorn them with graceful voicings and polyphony. To start with, one needs to identify the various bass motions, harmonic possibilities and structural features of the chaconne or passacaglia. Regular practice (and some perseverance!) will guarantee good results.

Firstly, I wish to specify that there are actually no crucial differences between a chaconne and a passacaglia. The distinctions are indeed subtle and involve small if not irrelevant features. Composers such as Girolamo Frescobaldi or François Couperin actually seem to have played with this ambiguity, switching back and forth between the two denominations, or even creating now and then transfigurations from one genre to the other within a same piece. Some maintain that a passacaglia is frequently minor and a chaconne major but there are many counterexamples. If anything, the chaconne may have been a slightly more stirring and extrovert dance than its sometimes more intimate and darker acolyte. However, important differences occur between the French chaconne and Italian ciaccona, which we shall analyse later.

DESCENDING DIATONIC/CHROMATIC BASSES

Let's first start by working with the so-called *Règle de l'Octave*. Those who are not familiar with it can consult, for instance, any French thorough-bass method of the 17th or 18th century. My favourite is the one described by Jean-François Dandrieu in his *Principes de l'Accompagnement du Clavecin*, 1718. (Circled numerals under the staff refer to degrees of the tonality.)

When selecting the first steps of the descending section (① ⑦ ⑥ ⑤), one obtains probably the most common chaconne/passacaglia bass there is! This sequence is also called phrygian or half-cadential.

All examples in this worksheet are my own, inspired by the manner of composers such as Louis Couperin, Pachelbel, Fisher and others.

Ex 1

Musical score for Ex 1, measures 1-4. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The right hand plays a melody with a trill on the second measure and a mordent on the fourth. The left hand provides a bass line with a trill on the second measure. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1, 7, 6, 5, 6, and 5 below the notes.

A common procedure is to repeat this, ending in the 8th bar with a full cadence. Note that it is also possible to (fully) cadence in the 4th bar, as in, by way of illustration, Bach's solo violin Chaconne.

Ex 2

Musical score for Ex 2, measures 1-5. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The right hand melody includes a trill in measure 2 and a mordent in measure 4. The left hand bass line includes a trill in measure 2. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 1, 7, 6, 5, 6, 5, 7, 6, 5, 3, 4, and 3 below the notes.

We can now envisage more harmonic possibilities. The first which comes to mind is the descending 7-6 / 7-6 pattern, one of the famous bass sequences as found in the *Rules of Fenaroli* or any other maestro of the Neapolitan school of *partimento*. Remember that intense study and practice of *partimento* develops improvisational skills. I highly recommend Robert O. Gjerdingen's excellent website on the subject: <http://faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/music/gjerdingen/partimenti/index.htm>.

In the following example, one has to prepare the 7 by placing a 6 on the 2nd or 3rd beat of any bar.

Ex 3

Musical score for Ex 3, measures 1-4. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The right hand melody includes a trill in measure 2 and a mordent in measure 4. The left hand bass line includes a trill in measure 2. Fingerings are indicated by circled numbers 6, 7, 6, 7, 6 below the notes.

Chromatic descent is a great favorite in the Baroque era, as found amongst countless examples, such as *Dido's Lament* or the *Crucifixus* of Bach's b-minor Mass.

Ex 4

A musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The bass line shows a chromatic descent: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The treble line has a melody with a trill on the final note.

In combination with 7 chords:

Ex 5

A musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The bass line shows a chromatic descent: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The treble line has a melody with a trill on the final note. The bass line is tied over bar lines.

In the case of suspensions, the bass is tied over the bar line and moves downwards on the 2nd or 3rd beat:

Ex 6

A musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The bass line shows a chromatic descent: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The treble line has a melody with a trill on the final note. The bass line is tied over bar lines, with suspensions on the 2nd and 3rd beats of the 2nd and 3rd bars. Chord symbols 4# and 6 are written below the bass line.

ASCENDING DIATONIC/CHROMATIC BASSES

Going back to the *Règle de l'Octave*, one can pick out another section, for instance (and quite logically)

- ① ② ③ ④ ⑤. Note that ④ can be placed on the 3rd beat of the 3rd bar, with ⑤ in the 4th bar, or simply ④ and ⑤ compressed into the 4th bar, in order to respect the 4-bar structure:

Ex 7

A musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The bass line shows an ascending diatonic/chromatic bass: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. The treble line has a melody with a trill on the final note. The bass line is tied over bar lines. Circled numbers ① through ⑤ are placed below the bass line. Chord symbols 6# and 6 are written below the bass line.

A nice way to climb up the scale is by using another fundamental *partimento* bass motion, which is the 5-6 / 5-6 etc.

Ex 8

Musical notation for Example 8, showing a bass line with notes and fingerings (6, 5, 6, 5, 6) in a 3/4 time signature.

7-6 / 7-6 are also a possibility (with the option of an additional 9, as demonstrated in bar 3):

Ex 9

Musical notation for Example 9, showing a bass line with notes and fingerings (7, 6, 9, 8, 7, 6) in a 3/4 time signature.

Some chaconnes/passacaglias start on a different section of the *Règle*, for instance degree ③, as found in the French repertoire, namely Louis Couperin.

Ex 10

Musical notation for Example 10, showing a bass line with notes and fingerings (6, 5, 6, 6, 5, 4, 3) in a 3/4 time signature, with circled numbers 3, 4, 5, and 1 below.

With more chromatic sophistication:

Ex 11

Musical notation for Example 11, showing a bass line with notes and fingerings in a 3/4 time signature.

BASS MOTIONS BY LEAP

Up until now the bass has moved diatonically or chromatically, upwards or downwards. But it can of course proceed by leap, using larger intervals. Here, we need to go back to the rules of *partimento* as defined by the above-mentioned Fenaroli, but also Paisiello, Furno or Durante.

Let's start with the interval of the descending 3rd, combined with 1 step upwards. Observe that the second beat of the bar, a 6 chord, can also be a root position:

Ex 12

Example 12 shows a bass line in 3/4 time, starting on G2. The first bar contains a descending 3rd interval (G2 to E2) followed by a 1-step upward motion (E2 to F2). The second bar contains a descending 3rd interval (F2 to D2) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D2 to E2). The third bar contains a descending 3rd interval (E2 to C2) followed by a 1-step upward motion (C2 to D2). The fourth bar contains a descending 3rd interval (D2 to B1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (B1 to C2). The fifth bar contains a descending 3rd interval (C2 to A1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (A1 to B1). The sixth bar contains a descending 3rd interval (B1 to G1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (G1 to A1). The seventh bar contains a descending 3rd interval (A1 to F1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (F1 to G1). The eighth bar contains a descending 3rd interval (G1 to E1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (E1 to F1). The figured bass notation below the notes is: ① 6 ⑦ ⑤ ⑥ ④ ⑤.

Next in line comes the interval of the 4th. When downwards and in combination with 1 step upwards, this produces the so-called *Romanesca* bass, immortalised by Pachelbel in his inescapable Canon. A 4-bar chaconne/passacaglia will use only a portion of the complete sequence, ending on the dominant.

Ex 13

Example 13 shows a bass line in 3/4 time, starting on G2. The first bar contains a descending 4th interval (G2 to D2) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D2 to E2). The second bar contains a descending 4th interval (E2 to B1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (B1 to C2). The third bar contains a descending 4th interval (C2 to G1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (G1 to A1). The fourth bar contains a descending 4th interval (A1 to E1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (E1 to F1). The fifth bar contains a descending 4th interval (F1 to C1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (C1 to D1). The sixth bar contains a descending 4th interval (D1 to A0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (A0 to B0). The seventh bar contains a descending 4th interval (B0 to F0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (F0 to G0). The eighth bar contains a descending 4th interval (G0 to D0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D0 to E0). The figured bass notation below the notes is: ① ⑤ ⑥ ⑤.

Now the complete 8-bar pattern:

Ex 14

Example 14 shows the complete 8-bar pattern of the Romanesca bass in 3/4 time, starting on G2. The first bar contains a descending 4th interval (G2 to D2) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D2 to E2). The second bar contains a descending 4th interval (E2 to B1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (B1 to C2). The third bar contains a descending 4th interval (C2 to G1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (G1 to A1). The fourth bar contains a descending 4th interval (A1 to E1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (E1 to F1). The fifth bar contains a descending 4th interval (F1 to C1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (C1 to D1). The sixth bar contains a descending 4th interval (D1 to A0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (A0 to B0). The seventh bar contains a descending 4th interval (B0 to F0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (F0 to G0). The eighth bar contains a descending 4th interval (G0 to D0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D0 to E0). The figured bass notation below the notes is: ① ⑤ ⑥ ③.

Example 14 shows the complete 8-bar pattern of the Romanesca bass in 3/4 time, starting on G2. The first bar contains a descending 4th interval (G2 to D2) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D2 to E2). The second bar contains a descending 4th interval (E2 to B1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (B1 to C2). The third bar contains a descending 4th interval (C2 to G1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (G1 to A1). The fourth bar contains a descending 4th interval (A1 to E1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (E1 to F1). The fifth bar contains a descending 4th interval (F1 to C1) followed by a 1-step upward motion (C1 to D1). The sixth bar contains a descending 4th interval (D1 to A0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (A0 to B0). The seventh bar contains a descending 4th interval (B0 to F0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (F0 to G0). The eighth bar contains a descending 4th interval (G0 to D0) followed by a 1-step upward motion (D0 to E0). The figured bass notation below the notes is: ④ ① ④ ⑤ ①.

Ex 18

Chaconne ou passacaille: a combination of patterns

Half-Romanesca

7 Full Romanesca or "Pachelbel"

13

19

25 4th up, 3rd down

31 MINOR: descending chromatic

36

41 3rd down, 2nd up

47 3 voice chromatic descent

54 "Ascending Règle de l'Octave", with 7 and 9 suspensions

60

65

71 etc.

HOW TO PRACTISE

With these basic instructions on how to improvise chaconnes or passacaglias, we can move on to a few exercises which will help you navigate more easily through the different forms.

1/ Beforehand, and importantly, you need to read through a lot of compositions, analysing them and committing to memory as much material as you can. This procedure is indispensable for reproducing with accuracy the manners and styles of the great composers. I recommend a thorough study of chaconnes (ciacconas), passacaglias and ground basses by:

- French masters such as Lully, Rebel, de Visée, Campion, Louis and François Couperin, Rameau (operas), etc.
- Italian masters such as Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, Merula, Bertali, Kapsberger, Sances, Storace, Kerll, etc.
- German masters such as Muffat, Fischer, Pachelbel, Handel, etc.
- Simpson, Purcell, etc.

Make a selection of your favourite works and retain as many compositional systems as you can. This will allow you to embellish your basses with elegant figurations selected from the repertoire. Pay special attention to the smooth progression of inner voices and the blossoming of graceful melodies.

2/ Learn the various bass types by heart, transposing them in the most common keys (up to 4 sharps or 4 flats) and harmonising them with simple chords, first in 3, then in 4 voices.

On organ, explore the different combinations, for example, in 4 voices (SATB):

- B in pedal, T in LH, A and S in RH
- B in pedal, T and A in LH, S in RH
- B in pedal, TAS in LH
- B in pedal, TAS in RH

3/ Still playing in chordal fashion, combine the different patterns introduced above, as shown in Example 18. Experiment with varying orders. Be sure to alternate half and full cadences in the 4th and 8th bar respectively. Sometimes, a cadence can be hemiolic, as in bar 63 and 64 of Example 18.

Ex 23

4/ Once you feel at ease with all the prototypes and have memorized them, explore different ways of integrating polyphonic activity.

a/ using eighth notes and *style luthé*, as shown in my examples above.

b/ using dactyle rhythms (*figura corta*) in the RH or LH

Ex 24

Exercise 24 is a two-staff musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The right hand (RH) features a melodic line with dactylic rhythms (two eighth notes followed by a quarter note). The left hand (LH) provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving bass lines.

c/ using runs and diminutions in the RH or LH

Ex 25

Exercise 25 is a two-staff musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The right hand (RH) features a melodic line with runs and diminutions (trills or grace notes). The left hand (LH) provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving bass lines.

d/ using triplets in the RH or LH

Ex 26

Exercise 26 is a two-staff musical score in 3/4 time, key of B-flat major. The right hand (RH) features a melodic line with triplets. The left hand (LH) provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving bass lines, also featuring triplets.

e/ using RH and LH alternation

Ex 27



May this little method be an inspiring guide for your exploration of one of the most noble and stylish dances of the Baroque era.



Patrick Ayrton
October 2015

Many thanks to Rudolf Lutz for his judicious advice and suggestions.