

A Practical Guide To Improvising

a Chaconne of Passacaglia

o 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.

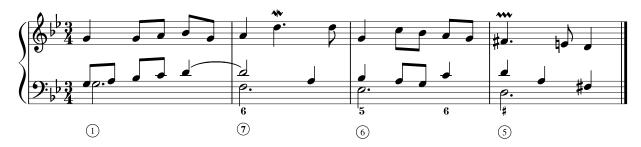
Descending diatonic/chromatic basses

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 stave refer to degrees of the tonality.)

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When selecting the first steps of the descending section (1 0 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 and others.

Ex 1



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





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.



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



In combination with 7 chords:

Ex 5



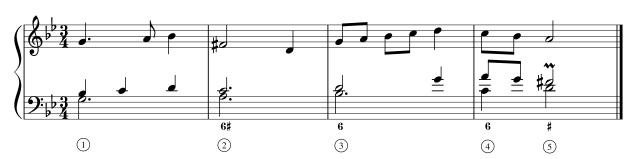
In the case of suspensions, the bass is tied over the bar line and moves downwards on the 2nd or 3rd beat:

Ex 6



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:



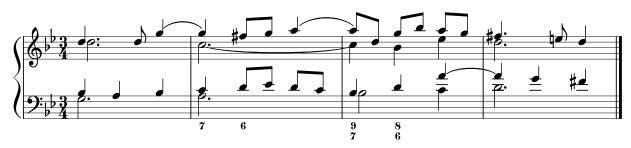
A nice way to climb up the scale is by using another fundamental *partimento* bass motion, which is the 5-6 / 5-6 etc.

Ex 8



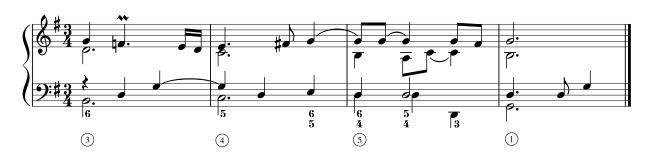
7-6 / 7-6 are also a possibility (with the option of an additional 9, as demonstrated in bar 3):

Ex 9



Some chaconnes/passacaglias start on a different section of the $\textbf{R\`egle}$, for instance degree 3, as found in the French repertoire, namely Louis Couperin.

Ex 10



With more chromatic sophistication:

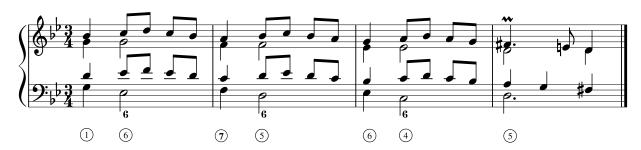


BASS MOTIONS BY LEAP

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.

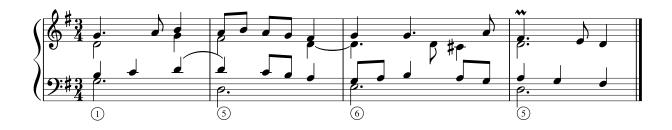
Let's start with the interval of the descending 3rd, combined with 1 step upwards. Observe that the second beat of the bar, a 6 chord, can also be a root position:

Ex 12



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.

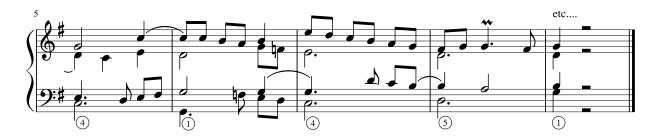
Ex 13



Now the complete 8-bar pattern:

Ex 14







The 4th can be used upwards when combined with a falling 3rd. Resemblance to "We wish you a Merry Christmas" is purely coincidental:

Ex 15



The 4th can also be used upwards with a preceding or subsequent falling 5th. This device produces one of the most celebrated Baroque sequences, usually called "chain of sevens", with reference to the thoroughbass figure often applied here:

Ex 16



The reverse of the preceding mechanism is an ascending 5th followed by a falling 4th, with the following application:

Ex 17



Building my chaconne/passacaglia

Having surveyed the principal bass motions listed above, one can easily start building one's own chaconne/ passacaglia by simply combining the schemata in any desired order. Consider that each model is usually repeated and that a change of mode (from major to minor or vice-versa) occurs commonly. Here comes a suggestion:

Chaconne ou passacaille: a combination of patterns





OTHER BASS TYPES

There exist of course many other types of chaconne/passacaglia basses, far too numerous to catalogue here. Some, additionally to the regular formulae, use larger leaps and have distinctive or even erratic structures. Buxtehude's well-known Passacaglia in d minor starts with an upbeat of a 5th from the tonic, then uses a spectacular falling minor 6th, rises a minor 2nd, falls a 4th, climbs again a minor 2nd, retrogrades back to the dominant and initiates a new cycle on the tonic.

Ex 19



17th-century England produced a wealth of ground basses. Simpson, Blow, Purcell, Clarke and Eccles left us an abundance of *ostinato* basses of which some follow conventional schemes while others are delightfully unpredictable. Consider this one by John Blow, from *The Catch Club*:

Ex 20



THE ITALIAN CIACCONA

There was a clearer differentiation between chaconne and passacaglia in 17th-century Italy. Ciacconas are generally in major and have a Romanesca-derived format, while passacaglias are often in minor and use either the descending tetrachord or ascending pentachord. Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, Merula, Bertali, to name a few, give us a legion of examples. Here the archetypal *ciaccona* bass:

Ex 21



In 4-voice harmonisation and with the customary melody in the discant:



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.

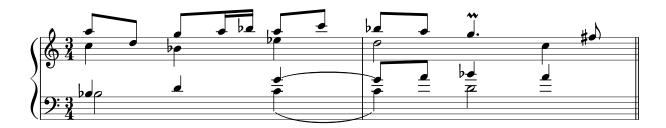
2/ Learn the various bass types by heart, transposing them in the most common keys (up to 4 sharps or 4 flats) and harmonising them with simple chords, first in 3, then in 4 voices.

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



c/ using runs and diminutions in the RH or LH

Ex 25



 $\mbox{d/}\mbox{using triplets}$ in the RH or LH

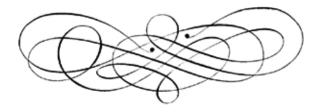


e/ using RH and LH alternation

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.