REINVENTING TRADITION: BRAHMS, PROGRESS, AND BASSO OSTINATO

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ABSTRACT

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In 1919, T. S. Eliot published “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” a seminal essay in the development of early twentieth-century modernism. Eliot posited that a good poet must possess an understanding of history and of his predecessors, and therefore see historical tradition as vital to their craft. Instead of rejecting tradition as a crutch for unoriginality, Eliot advocated the embrace of tradition. Eliot’s model of poetic tradition and influence bears many similarities to the work of Johannes Brahms, who frequently alluded to the past throughout his oeuvre.

Although deemed “conservative” by many of his contemporaries, Brahms incorporated elements of tradition into his music through allusions to specific composers, genres, styles, and techniques. Although these very traits earned him the label “conservative,” several authors have since revised this notion of Brahms. In his famous essay “Brahms the Progressive,” Arnold Schoenberg identified certain aspects of Brahms’s music that were progressive rather than traditional. In the same vein, scholars such as Michael Musgrave, Kevin Korsyn, and others have suggested that Brahms’s “old-fashioned” leanings mark him as a progressive, or even an early modernist.

Taking Eliot’s ideal poet as a model, I examine two works by Brahms that utilize a specific compositional device distinctively lifted from earlier music: basso ostinato. The second movement of String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18 (1860) and the Variations on a Theme of Haydn for Orchestra, Opus 56a (1873) both utilize basso ostinato, through a hybrid chaconne and a passacaglia, respectively. These two pieces look not only look backward, but also forward, and display progressive qualities, such as those enumerated by Schoenberg. Through a retroactive association with Eliot’s paradigm of tradition, Brahms’s works that incorporate basso ostinato can be seen as examples of his innovation.
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CHAPTER I. TRADITION AND INFLUENCE

“No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.” So says T. S. Eliot in his 1919 essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” a seminal essay in the establishment of early twentieth-century modernism.1 Eliot’s candid discussion of tradition and historical awareness resonates with poets, critics, artists, and musicians alike. Emerging from the Romantic era, which reacted pejoratively against the traditionalism and putative restriction of neoclassicism in favor of the artist’s self-expression, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” offered an alternative perspective that embraced historicism. Eliot wrote his essay in response to the negative connotations built around the concept of tradition by the English Romantics.2 To Eliot, tradition did not imply unoriginality or inferiority, but was a necessary framework for comparison, assessment, and inspiration. With this understanding, Eliot posits that a poet has no value unless he is valued “among the dead,”3 and proceeds to develop a model of the ideal poet, who embraces his predecessors and established traditions.

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1 Thomas Stearns Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” from The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, ed. Peter Simon (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 1093. The essay was first published in the autumn of 1919 in the British literary magazine The Egoist, and then reprinted in Eliot’s first collection of essays, The Sacred Wood, in 1920. The Egoist, formerly known as The Freewoman and The New Freewoman, both suffrage magazines, was in its final days when Eliot’s essay was published. Its earlier forms as The Freewoman and The New Freewoman were widely successful, attracting a large audience of educated women from the middle and upper classes. As the magazine moved away from women’s suffrage and towards the nascence of early modernism into mainstream culture (as The Egoist), it lost its primary audience—also the audience that guaranteed the support of advertisers. The magazine shifted its appeal to the rising lower middle class, which lacked any claims to social status, but were keenly interested in early modernism and the avant-garde. Mark S. Morrison, The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 84ff.

2 Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 1092. Eliot makes it clear throughout the essay whom he was targeting.

3 Ibid., 1093.
If one is to establish parallels between Eliot’s ideal poet and the ideal composer, Johannes Brahms epitomizes this paradigm. Brahms has often been viewed by scholars as a composer who frequently incorporated traditional elements into his music. His allusions to earlier works, styles, or composers are supported by his own extensive scholarship, which is a testimony to the rise of historicism during his lifetime.4

To demonstrate the parallels between Eliot’s ideal poet and Johannes Brahms, I have selected various works by Brahms that use the technique of *basso ostinato*. Although parallels could be made between Eliot’s ideal poet and the majority of Brahms’s *oeuvre*, the works that incorporate *basso ostinato* offer a slice of Brahms’s output that ideally exemplifies these traits.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent”

Although many of Eliot’s ideas are not entirely novel—he himself must rely on his own place “among the dead” to reach his readers—they underscore a significant notion: the long-lasting influence of art and its simultaneous coexistence in contemporaneous art, literature, and music that defies a linear approach to history. A poet must therefore develop what Eliot calls the “historical sense,” which is both timeless and temporal.5 An awareness of history is not something that is easily obtained; the poet must labor to expand his understanding of how the past has shaped the present. It is this historical awareness and its application that makes the poet traditional. That is not to say that tradition is a total compliance with the past, for then the work cannot be considered new art. Tradition mandates the development of an innovative work that creates channels to the past and the present, while paving the way for further innovations in the

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future. In this way, each new work of art shifts the existing order of things, creating a new web of connections between different movements and epochs.

In evaluating each new work of art, Eliot considers how the past is reflected in this present work:

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.6

Eliot is not advocating blind imitation, but a more laborious approach that requires the poet to strive for knowledge and expertise while revitalizing his art for the present. To create an unaffected blend of past and present is no easy task; the creator risks erring either on the side of excessive imitation or extreme originality, without accessibility or meaning. Preexisting works become essential to forming interpretation and understanding. In practice, then, a poet must deal with an overwhelming amount of influence learned from his predecessors. To achieve results worthy of his approval, Eliot advises the synthesis of knowledge and experience.

The second part of Eliot’s essay expresses the separation of the poet’s individual experiences and emotions from a global sense of knowledge and understanding attained through his comprehension of history and tradition. Eliot uses the analogy of a catalyst to describe this state:

I, therefore, invite you to consider . . . the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and

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6 Ibid., 1092.
When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. *The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates;* the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

These concepts are closely aligned to central ideas of New Criticism, the Anglo-American literary theory movement that originated in the 1920s. New Criticism concerned itself with the poet’s removal of self. Eliot, along with New Critics, essentially believed that a poet’s work should be valued as autonomous text, not as part of the historical context or biographical experiences. This paradigm invites censure, however, by its seeming disregard for the historical context in which a work of art is conceived. In fact, Eliot himself disagreed with the New Critics, who, in their disregard for context, also overlooked the influence of tradition and historical awareness on the artist’s work. Eliot’s advocacy of impersonality and autonomy did not exclude all external influences, but rather the poet’s personal self-expression, which shifts the focus of contextualization to the poet’s own knowledge and experience.

According to Eliot, the poet’s identity is in two parts: there is the “man who suffers” and then there is the “mind which creates.” This bifurcation shows that a poet’s creation is not void of contextual influence, but rather is separate from an individual expression of the poet’s basic emotions; the poet’s job is to express through his medium, not through his personality. Eliot

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7 At the end of this sentence, Eliot’s original readers were left waiting until the second portion of the essay was published in the next issue of *The Egoist.*
8 Ibid., 1094-1095. Emphasis is mine.
overturns William Wordsworth’s belief that poetry originates in “emotion recollected in tranquility,”\textsuperscript{10} an outpouring of the poet’s sentiment. Instead, Eliot rationalizes that:

It is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquility. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation.\textsuperscript{11}

Eliot then concedes that a poet cannot operate without some deliberation, but his principal point is reiterated, and that is the “continual surrender” of the poet, for “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” Indeed, if this were not the case, who would want to read poetry based on one person’s individual experiences and feelings? It would be completely esoteric and uninviting unless it appealed to a wider audience through the sharing of common knowledge and experience.

A significant contributor to the discourse on musical culture in the nineteenth century, Carl Dahlhaus, distinguishes between tradition and progress in \textit{Foundations of Music History}. Tradition, Dahlhaus claims, concerns itself with the present and the future; tradition can be used to linger in the past and predict a future with little change. According to his model of historiography, this often resulted in “naive traditionalism,” which tended towards “restoration,” an undesirable attribute that implied imitation instead of creativity.\textsuperscript{12} Progress, on the other hand, looked towards the future by leaving the shelter offered by a reliance on history in an attempt to forge new paths.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
Awareness of the past is not incompatible with aesthetic presence; on the contrary, it can be a component part of that presence. The historicist firmly believes that what a work has to say about the age in which it was written belongs at once and the same time to the past and the present, not because works are ‘timeless’ but because past and present form an indissoluble alloy. The past is what has survived from the past, and hence is part and parcel of the present.14

Dahlhaus and Eliot agree in this case, that the past and present are irrevocably tied together.

Eliot’s Model of Tradition and Brahms

The paradigm established in Eliot’s essay is easily applied to Johannes Brahms, who was often considered old-fashioned among his contemporaries.15 This designation rose from his fascination with early music and his scholarly bent, which manifested themselves in a compositional style replete with allusions to older music and compositional devices. These characteristics of Brahms’s style lay in his adherence to classical forms, genres, and idioms, and the lack of program music in his output. Although deemed old-fashioned as a result, Brahms was acutely aware of his place in history and of his predecessors, achieved through his careful study of their music and aided by his impressive music library.16 Eliot would have considered this a valuable attribute, an attribute that set him apart from composers who did not turn to the work of their precursors.

Had Eliot written the essay before 1897, Brahms would have surely related to his way of thinking. Consider Brahms’s comments to Georg Henschel in 1876:

14 Ibid., 70.
16 For a complete catalogue of Brahms’s library see Kurt Hofmann, Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms: Bücher- und Musikalienverzeichnis (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1974).
There is no real creating without hard work. That which you would call invention, that is to say a thought, an idea, is simply an inspiration from above, for which I am not responsible, which is not merit of mine. Yes, it is a present, a gift, which I ought even to despise until I have made it my own by right of hard work. And there need be no hurry about that either. It is as with the seed-corn: it germinates unconsciously and in spite of ourselves.17

As Brahms was not known for particular religiosity, it is possible to surmise that he referred not to a benevolent deity but to the work and achievement of his musical ancestors. The final clause is in itself a testimony of Eliot’s theory of impersonality. Brahms does not state that his “creation” will simply appear, like a sprouting seed, with the aid of environmental forces; on the contrary, Brahms emphasizes the artist’s agency.

Although Brahms is often considered a traditionalist—not by Eliot’s definition—in the context of the rapidly changing musical context in the middle of the nineteenth century, others endow him with a contrasting position, for the same reasons that some label him a conservative. In keeping with Eliot’s criteria for a great poet, Brahms’s music acknowledges the past without blindly conforming to it. Parallels exist between Eliot’s ideal poet and Arnold Schoenberg’s revisionist assessment of Brahms. In his essay “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg reevaluated Brahms’s identity as a conservative, although his praise and elevation of Brahms was in many ways a self-serving act. In his quest for the next step in music progress, which had already culminated in his development of twelve-tone technique, Schoenberg received inspiration from many of Brahms’s compositional techniques. By raising Brahms from old-fashioned to progressive, Schoenberg would validate his own compositional style and influence.

In “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg compares Brahms to earlier composers (i.e., Mozart and Haydn), targeting a few progressive traits that Brahms learned from their example. Schoenberg implies that Brahms’s admiration of his predecessors did not result in the “shackles of an aesthetic of popular complaisance,” but rather the making of a progressive composer.18 Schoenberg devotes his essay to Brahms’s innovations in the domains of phrasing, motivic development, text, and harmonic structure, without neglecting to mention examples of these events in previous literature. Although Schoenberg mentions Brahms’s connection to his predecessors only briefly, Brahms’s awareness of the past defines his identity as a musician and composer.

Schoenberg’s preoccupation with Brahms means that he also dealt with the meaning of tradition and the impact on his own work. Michael Musgrave further extends Schoenberg’s portrait of Brahms as a progressive to include an additional progressive trait: Brahms’s interest in the “study and performance of music which lay well before the conventional repertory of the musical world in which he lived.”19 As Musgrave notes, Brahms’s lifetime fell at a serendipitous time in music history, when the rise of historicism provided the perfect environment for his antiquarian bent. Several complete editions of composers’ works, some bearing Brahms’s handiwork as editor, were published during his lifetime in the unprecedented surge of interest in early music.20 These circumstances afforded Brahms a unique perspective, which allowed him to draw upon compositional techniques from a broad spectrum of styles and eras.

20 Brahms was involved with the complete work editions of Chopin, Bach, Couperin, and Schubert.
In his brief article, Musgrave describes Brahms’s interests in early music as a scholar and a director, but does not expand upon the incorporation of older techniques into Brahms’s music. In another article that correlates Brahms and modernism, Walter Frisch demonstrates the relationship between J. S. Bach’s keyboard music and Brahms’s solo piano and organ works. His analysis of Brahms’s music will serve in some capacity as a model for the analyses in this thesis. Brahms’s music is in itself the best testimony to his identity as a composer who embodies T. S. Eliot’s description of the ideal artist. Studying Brahms’s music demands a wide knowledge of many different musical styles, which make up the rhetoric in his music, learned from centuries of music blended together in perfect agreement. Schoenberg found progressive tendencies by studying innovative aspects of Brahms’s music; Musgrave saw Brahms’s scholarship as a sign of modernism, an idea that is central to this thesis.

In his work on twentieth-century music, Joseph Straus has delineated two opposing musical dualities that existed in the first half of the twentieth century: the neoclassicists and the progressives. Of these two camps, Schoenberg belonged to the progressives, whose primary objective was the continuation of developments made in tonal music by the end of the nineteenth century, in contrast to the neoclassicists who sought to restore the balance and order of the Classical era. Despite the opposing perspectives, the two groups shared common ground in the influence of tradition. Their music demonstrates the difference between their approaches to the past. Schoenberg felt the burden of the past keenly, and struggled to live up to the greatness of his predecessors.

In a similar vein, Kevin Korsyn has sought to develop a theory of intertextuality in music that would demonstrate a model for mapping influence. As a model, Korsyn used Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* to map the influence of Chopin on Brahms through various musical examples. Bloom’s literary theory traces six revisionary ratios that follow a poet’s changing relationship with the past; from the poet’s earliest “misprisions” of their predecessors, through complete antithesis, to a final return and ownership of the precursor, the six revisionary ratios spell out an Oedipal struggle with the past that the poet must confront.

In his article, Korsyn convincingly establishes examples of Bloom’s ratios within Brahms’s Scherzo in E-flat minor, Opus 4 and Romanze, Opus 118, No. 5. Bloom’s theory fits neatly with the examples given by Korsyn, but *The Anxiety of Influence* may be seen as the antithesis to “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Bloom outlines a relationship with influence that demands action from the poet to subdue and defeat the source of his or her influence. Korsyn models his article after Bloom’s theory of influence, which, *ipso facto*, implies that Korsyn’s article is antithetical to the connection that I establish between Brahms and Eliot. While Bloom regards influence as something to fight against, Eliot suggests one can succeed only through its embrace. Bloom openly vocalized his dislike of the “abominable Eliot,” disdaining the submissiveness of Eliot’s theory of influence. Richard Taruskin added to the discourse in his review of Korsyn’s article and Straus’s *Remaking the Past*. Taruskin draws the difference between Bloom and Eliot in sharp relief. Eliot’s concept of influence, which Taruskin asserts has

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been most commonly followed by musicologists, requires a consciousness of influence; and, Bloom’s theory, as Taruskin points out, “makes unconsciousness of influence an implicit certainty, virtually a requirement.”

26 The incompatibility of these two modes of thought rises in part from this difference. If one is to apply either Eliot’s or Bloom’s theory, they must decide—as far as they are able—whether the influence in question was manifested consciously or unconsciously. Without entering into a discussion of the different levels of consciousness and Freud, the most basic difference between conscious and unconscious influence can be simply delineated as deliberate or not. In Korsyn’s case, Bloom’s theory corresponds with his musical examples through Brahms’s assertion in 1853 that he had never heard Chopin’s music when he composed Scherzo Op. 4.27 Brahms’s claim seems tinged by anxiety—anxiety that his own originality would not be recognized—and that is Korsyn’s reading of the statement.

27 Korsyn, “Towards a New Poetics of Musical Influence,” 16-17. In a meeting in Weimar with Franz Liszt and composer Joachim Raff, Brahms allegedly made this claim after Liszt sight-read Scherzo Op. 4 and Raff noted the similarities to Chopin’s Scherzo Op. 31. Of course, Brahms would undeniably become highly aware of Chopin later, especially as an editor of the Chopin *Gesamtausgabe* in the 1870s.

The musical examples that I will use to establish a reading of Eliot’s theories in Brahms’s music display such overt allusions to older styles, techniques, and composers that I believe they can only be conscious. As I explore the influence and originality in each selected work, aspects of deliberate borrowing, modeling, and alluding become self-evident. I have deliberately selected these works for the reason that they are examples of conscious influence, although this is not necessarily true of every work in Brahms’s *oeuvre*. The dichotomy between Bloom and Eliot is then reconciled when the nature of the influence and the composer’s intent are studied.
Brahms and Modernism

Musgrave, Frisch, Strauss, and Korsyn are not alone in their assessment of Brahms through the lenses of twentieth-century paradigms. While modernism is often considered an extension of Romanticism, a stance that appears to fit Brahms’s contradictory identity, J. Peter Burkholder and Bayan Northcott go so far as to label Brahms as the first modernist composer, eclipsing even Wagner for the title. Both Musgrave and Burkholder concur that Peter Gay, in his own revision of Brahms’s reception, pinpoints this issue to the fact that Brahms does not fit the definition of modernism as “avant-garde” and subversive, but follows a far more complex and difficult concept of modernism. Gay sums up Brahms’s complicated and paradoxical identity both as a “traditionalist and innovator, both a conservative and a radical, both a craftsman and a creator.”

Rather than creating further disparity between the different characteristics of Brahms’s music, this view reconciles the differences and helps understand Brahms’s seamless synthesis of influences.

Burkholder redefines musical modernism as “music written by composers obsessed with the musical past and with their place in music history, who seek to emulate the music of those we call the ‘classical masters,’ measuring the value of their own music by the standards of the past.” In his redefinition, Burkholder named Brahms as the beginning of the movement. This definition contributes to a parallel between Eliot’s essay and an analysis of Brahms’s

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compositions in later chapters. The work of Schoenberg and other contributors to the Brahms-
Schoenberg critical tradition is further enriched through the retroactive association with Eliot’s
essay.

The formalist offshoots found in Eliot’s approach to artistic autonomy have, in the course
of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, lost credence among musicologists in favor of
contextual and interpretive approaches to music scholarship. This thesis proposes that the critical
framework established by modernists like T. S. Eliot and Arnold Schoenberg provides a lens
with which to view Brahms’s music. Additionally, his lifetime, within the span of the nineteenth
century, seems to establish him securely as a Romantic composer, but as many scholars have
noted, his music points toward both the future and the past. Had he lived into the twentieth
century, one could easily imagine Brahms aligning himself with the modernist movement.

To narrow the scope of this study on Brahms’s relationship with tradition, I have selected
a specific compositional tool found in Brahms’s music across his output that he borrowed from
early music: *basso ostinato*. This technique is associated with several different forms and appears
in different permutations throughout Brahms’s *oeuvre*. A variety of reasons compelled me to
select the use of *basso ostinato* in Brahms’s music as the object of my research and analysis.
Firstly, Brahms emphasized the importance of the bass, remarking on several occasions that the
bass was the most important aspect of variations. Secondly, *basso ostinato* is a strikingly audible
reference to earlier music; this audibility and the resulting connotations to earlier music connect
Brahms’s use of the ostinato bass to a discussion of his identity as a traditionalist—in T. S.
Eliot’s terms, as someone who possesses an awareness of his predecessors and the ability to
synthesize this knowledge. As a common device in the Renaissance and Baroque periods that
Brahms studied so carefully, *basso ostinato* provides substantial material for analysis in Brahms’s music, especially when discussed in the context of his historical awareness.

Finally, the repetitive nature of *basso ostinato* and often the corresponding melodic material create a paradoxical situation, in which the composer must find ways to maintain interest in the theme at hand. The *basso ostinato* has innately limiting possibilities that dictate the musical outcome, requiring the composer to reach great heights of creativity and innovation in order to produce a musically engaging work. Brahms’s application of the technique in the nineteenth century, therefore, offers the opportunity to make a comparison between his approach to this quandary and that of his predecessors. The similarities and differences discovered through this comparison offer further insight into Brahms’s music, the influence of his forerunners, and the implications formed by these aspects of his musicianship.

This thesis considers several works by Brahms that incorporate *basso ostinato*, both as a large-scale form and as an incidental compositional device, while reevaluating the use of this antiquated compositional tool as the ultimate expression of individuality and of the duality between tradition and progress. Chapter Two addresses the problematic definitions of forms connected with *basso ostinato*. While it does not attempt to clarify the differences between all ostinato forms (for example the chaconne and the passacaglia), it still determines the formal expectations based on nineteenth-century definitions and Brahms’s own understanding. I further address Brahms’s acquaintance with *basso ostinato* through his knowledge of works by earlier composers. Additionally, a brief analysis of Brahms’s first two piano sonatas discems early tendencies towards emphasizing the bass, which may have influenced his use of *basso ostinato*.

Chapters Three and Four contain the analyses of specific works by Brahms that utilize *basso ostinato*, namely the second movement of the String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18
(1860), and the Finale from the Variations on a Theme of Haydn, Opus 56a (1873). The fourth movement of Brahms’s Fourth Symphony is the most famous example of *basso ostinato* throughout Brahms’s work, but lies outside the scope of this thesis.\(^3\) The final Chapter of this thesis returns to the ideas of tradition and progress, past and present, and final conclusions about Brahms’s incorporation of these elements.

CHAPTER II. DEFINING BASSO OSTINATO

The multiple forms and mutations of *basso ostinato* have evaded decisive definitions by scholars who have sought to investigate the origins and the correlations between the varieties of ostinato bass. For the purposes of this paper, I investigate the common characteristics of the ground, bergamask,1 passacaglia, chaconne, and folia as they appear in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.2 This chapter does not attempt to solve the confusion arising from these different forms, but to provide a basic understanding of the expectations associated with each. Although I have included insight into the different forms from contemporary sources, my primary focus is to develop an understanding of Brahms’s perception of these forms, and accordingly provide a basis for the terminology that is used throughout this thesis.

The use of a repeated bass theme surfaces as early as the thirteenth century in the iconic *Sumer Canon*, which has a repeated theme in the lowest voice.3 Although this medieval device is not necessarily the origin of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ostinato forms, it must be acknowledged as a precursor. The bergamask, passacaglia, chaconne, and folia find origins within dance music, although their derived dances are vastly different.

The ground or ground bass is often used as a comprehensive term for *basso ostinato*, but refers more specifically to an English *basso ostinato* form appearing in the sixteenth century.

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2 Wallace Berry, *Form in Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966), 277n4. Berry provides a careful description of each ostinato form and illustrates them with musical examples. He does not pretend to solve the confusion of ostinato forms, but gives his readers the means to distinguish between the various types of ostinato basses.

3 Berry, *Form in Music*, 270. The repeated bass theme is called a *pes*, which is Latin for “foot,” and commonly used in English repertoire.
The early sixteenth-century English ground bass did not originate in dance music as the other forms of *basso ostinato* and was often more serious in nature, although it later developed to incorporate the dance influence of Italy and Spain. Ground variations could also refer to a subject that moved between voices, but by the seventeenth century, the ground bass gradually became the most common version of the form.\(^4\)

Chaconne, Passacaglia, and Folia

The passacaglia and the chaconne generate the most confusion, stemming from similar origins and lacking consistent application by scholars and composers. No doubt, the interchangeable use of the terms has contributed to the lack of clarity surrounding the passacaglia and chaconne. Both forms are typically in triple meter, but the chaconne is traditionally marked by an accented second beat.\(^5\) A common distinguishing feature is in the presentation of the bass theme. A passacaglia will often begin with an unaccompanied statement of the bass theme, indicating a more melodic base, while the chaconne serves as a repeating harmonic structure, rather than a repeating melody.\(^6\)

That the chaconne and passacaglia are separate entities remains undisputed. Evidence of this lies in the presence of both chaconne and passacaglia movements within suites. Girolamo Frescobaldi, who wrote some of the earliest keyboard chaconnes and passacaglias, wrote chaconnes and passacaglias side-by-side. A comparison of Frescobaldi’s chaconnes and passacaglias reveals some consistent differences between the two genres that include major mode and compound meter in his chaconnes, as opposed to minor mode and simple meter in his

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\(^4\) Robert U. Nelson, *The Technique of Variation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 66. This source has proven indispensable for my research, and even Wallace Berry found it so when writing the variation portion of *Form in Music*.


\(^6\) Berry, *Form in Music*, 282.
passacaglias. *Cento partite sopra passacagli* (1637) is a work by Frescobaldi that alternates between chaconne and passacaglia.\(^7\)

Perhaps the most famed chaconne from the Baroque is J. S. Bach’s *Chaconne* from the Violin Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004 (Example 2.1). The *Chaconne* is the concluding movement of a dance suite, but it is also one of the longest—if not the longest—single movement of its time.\(^8\) In the approximately fifteen minutes of its performance, the chaconne bass appears sixty-four times throughout the movement. The *Chaconne* bass does not remain exactly the same during all variations, but the implied harmonic structure is always present.

![Example 2.1](http://www.sscm-jscm.org/v4/no1/archbold.html)

The passacaglia began as an improvised ritornello between sung verses, but soon developed to resemble the chaconne as a chain of variations above a repeated bass. It holds the distinction of sometimes involving voices other than the bass. As with many unique components of the passacaglia—and the chaconne—the different variants are associated with different eras and regions, contributing to the chaos in defining either the chaconne or the passacaglia. In the case of the movable theme, the precedent developed in Italy.\(^10\)

In Germany, the passacaglia frequently appeared in keyboard works. J. S. Bach’s *Passacaglia for Organ in C minor, BWV 582* (1708-1712) is a quintessential example of a

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\(^8\) Joel Lester, *Bach’s Works for Solo Violin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 151.


Baroque keyboard passacaglia (Example 2.2). It begins with a complete, unaccompanied statement of the \textit{basso ostinato}, before the additional voices are added.

**EXAMPLE 2.2.** J. S. Bach, Passacaglia for Organ in C minor, BWV 582, mm. 1-10\textsuperscript{11}

The eight-measure \textit{basso ostinato} repeats several times in its original form before it becomes varied, and even disappears for portions of the work. The length of the \textit{basso ostinato}, the use of triple meter, and its application throughout the work makes this a textbook example of passacaglia.

A keyboard passacaglia that demonstrates some generic abnormalities is present in the final movement of George Friedrich Handel’s Suite No. 7 in G minor, HWV 432 (1720); it is a passacaglia (or, in its French variant here, \textit{passacaille}), but it is in the less common guise of duple meter (Example 2.3).

**EXAMPLE 2.3.** G. F. Handel, Suite No. 7 in G minor, HWV 432, Passacaille, mm. 1-5\textsuperscript{12}


Handel’s Passacaglia does not begin with an unaccompanied statement of the *basso ostinato*, but it otherwise follows many of the expectations for the passacaglia, including the mode and the four-measure phrase (the most common phrase lengths being four or eight measures).

The bergamask and the folia are equally similar *bassi ostinati*. They were both prominent in Italian repertory and based on dances. They are often associated with specific bass, harmonic, and melodic schemes. The folia is believed to be an old Portuguese dance in triple meter, from which composers would imitate and vary specific elements of the original dance.13

“Folia” is found in the titles of pieces dating back to the end of the sixteenth century.14 It has been associated with fast-paced and wild dances, as suggested by the translation of folia to “mad” or “empty-headed.”15 The folia appears in great variety, because, conventionally, different features of the original dance would be appropriated into compositions. These could include elements modeled after the rhythm, harmony, bass, or melody of the folia. The folia closely resembles the genre of chaconne, but with the added stipulation of a specific chord progression and melody.

The bergamask and folia fall under the category of melodic-harmonic structure, which borrows from the melody, harmony, and bass of its model.16 One of the earliest examples of the

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14 Ibid.
16 Nelson, *The Technique of Variation*, 16. Nelson refers to this as the “melodico-harmonic” variation form, a term that he takes from Belgian musicologist Charles van den Borren. Other terms include: *auszierende Variationen* (Hugo Leichtentritt, contributor to Oscar Thompson’s *International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, 1939), figural variation (Karl Blessinger, German musicologist and H. Viecenz, who authored a 1924 book about variation form), and decorative variation (Vincent d’Indy, the French composer and early music scholar). I use the term “melodic-harmonic variations” as the most intuitive description of this form.
folia is shown in Example 2.4. The basis for subsequent versions of the folia stems from this harmonic and melodic structure.

EXAMPLE 2.4. The early seventeenth-century folia

\[\text{Example 2.4 demonstrates the harmonic and melodic simplicity of the folia, which provides a malleable workspace for variations.}\]

Later versions of the folia underwent more drastic changes, especially in the hands of French composers. Jean-Baptiste Lully’s *Marche de Savoye* (1685, also called *Air des hautbois*) is based on the folia, but changes the meter to duple and the mode to major. Of course, Lully’s folia is rhythmically and texturally characteristic of his French overture style. A well-known example of the folia in the French repertory is Marin Marais’s *Les folies d’espagne* (1701), which uses triple meter and the minor mode.

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In 1700, Arcangelo Corelli wrote a folia that uses the same theme and progression as Marais’s *Les folies d’espagne* of the following year. Corelli’s Violin Sonata, Opus 5, No. 12 in D minor (Example 2.5) is the concluding sonata of Opus 5, as well as the lengthiest sonata in the opus.

**EXAMPLE 2.5.** Arcangelo Corelli, Violin Sonata Opus 5, No. 12 in D minor, “La folia,” mm. 1-16

As demonstrated in Corelli’s Violin Sonata, the folia became associated with a slower and graver character, rather than the energetic and even bawdy character of its origins. Composers possess great flexibility with this melodic-harmonic variation, which gives them the freedom to modify alternately the ostinato bass, the melody, and the harmonic schemes of the folia. The second movement of Brahms’s Sextet in B-flat major, Opus 18, which will be addressed later in this

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19 An English version of the folia melody and harmony is in John Playford’s *The Division Violin*, published in 1684. This could serve as the model for both Marais’s and Corelli’s folias, but the folia was so widespread that it is impossible to pinpoint the exact connection between Playford’s *Division* and other folias.

20 This work was in Brahms’s music library. Kurt Hofmann, *Die Bibliothek von Johannes Brahms*, 150. Joseph Joachim’s edition of Corelli’s violin sonatas (from 1888-1891) was also in Brahms’s library.

thesis, provides an example of melodic-harmonic variations based on the folia, although it is in duple rather than triple meter.²²

A final distinction must be made between *basso ostinato* as a form and as a device. The *basso ostinato* appears as a form when the repeating bass generates the entire work’s development and structure. This implies that the bass theme is a complete phrase, an “ostinato phrase,” usually spanning four to eight measures long.²³ The bass theme is usually accompanied by melodic variations, which receive their support from the repetitive bass. The ostinato phrase often appears unchanged for the first few repetitions so that the theme is thoroughly established before the composer changes it thematically or rhythmically. An “ostinato period” is similar to the ostinato phrase, but represents an antecedent-consequent phrase structure, and is usually longer than an ostinato phrase.²⁴ The “ostinato motive” is an incidental *basso ostinato*, which does not generate a formal structure, but makes its appearance in a work as a compositional device.²⁵ I consider the use of *basso ostinato* in, for example, one variation of a variation set to be a formal use of *basso ostinato* in a discrete or closed section. The examples that I look at in this thesis encompass *bassi ostinati* that accompany melodic variations, and in some instances undergo bass variations within the ostinato.

**Brahms’s perspective**

The preceding discussion of the forms and genres that use *basso ostinato* is meant to establish an understanding of the different possibilities offered by the chaconne, passacaglia, and folia, using examples from literature with which Brahms was familiar. Brahms’s library offers a

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²² For additional examples of folias, see Nelson, *The Technique of Variation* and the Grove entry by Gerbino and Silbiger cited earlier.
²³ *Berry, Form in Music*, 271-272. Berry addresses the differences between an “ostinato phrase,” an “ostinato motive,” and an “ostinato period.”
²⁴ Ibid., 273.
²⁵ Ibid., 272.
picture of his acquaintance with \textit{basso ostinato} through the possession of many scores; of the above musical examples, only Frescobaldi’s \textit{Partite} was not in Brahms’s library. To illustrate further a deeper picture of Brahms’s knowledge of \textit{basso ostinato}, I now turn to contemporary music dictionaries in his library.

One of the music dictionaries in Brahms’s possession, Heinrich Christoph Koch’s \textit{Musikalisches Lexicon} (1865 edition), provides insight into Brahms’s understanding of \textit{basso ostinato} and related forms (Table 2.1). The dictionary does not contain an entry for the bergamask or the folia, but includes lengthy definitions for both the chaconne and the passacaglia. As seen in the following definitions from Koch’s \textit{Musikalisches Lexicon}, the passacaglia and the chaconne had already sparked debate as to their exact specifications.

\textbf{TABLE 2.1. From H. Ch. Koch’s \textit{Musikalisches Lexicon}}\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{tabular}{l l}
\textbf{basso ostinato} oder \textit{obligato}. \textit{Basso contrainte}, ein Basssubject von bald grösserer bald geringerer Ausdehnung, welches das ganze Tonstück hindurch, entweder ununterbrochen oder nur mit einzelnen kurzen Unterbrechungen, immer wieder von vorne anfängt, sobald es zu Ende ist, während die Ober- und Mittelstimmen immer neue Contrapunkte dagegen ausführen. Ein sehr schönes Beispiel von dieser Setzart ist der Einleitungschor zu Händel’s Susanne (deutsche Händelgesellsch. I). Die Ciacona und der Passacaglio gehören auch zu dieser Setzart.\textsuperscript{27} & \textbf{basso ostinato or \textit{obligato}. \textit{Basso contrainte}}. A bass subject, of sometimes larger sometimes smaller expanse, which occurs throughout the whole piece of music, either continuously or with only short breaks, and always starts from the beginning to the end, while the upper and middle voices always execute new counterpoint against it. A very fine example of this type is the opening chorus in Handel’s \textit{Susanne} (German Handel Society, I). The chaconne and the passacaglia are also part of this type. \\
\textbf{Ciacona, Chaconne}, ursprünglich in seinem Heimathande Italien und auch in Spanien sehr beliebter Tanz, Tanzartiges Instrumental- und auch Gesangstück im Dreivierteltakt, von mässiger Bewegung, dessen Eigenthümlichkeit & \textbf{Ciacona, Chaconne}, originally in its homeland Italy and also in Spain a popular dance, a dance-like instrumental and also vocal piece in 3-4 time, of moderate pace, whose singularity exists therein, that a four or eight \\
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{26} Heinrich Christoph Koch, \textit{Musikalisches Lexicon}, rev. Arrey von Dommer (Heidelberg: J. C. B. Mohr, 1865). Translations are my own. \\
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 97-98.
darin besteht, dass ein vier oder acht Takte langes, melodisch einfach gebildetes und rhythmisch recht markiertes Bassthema beständig wiederholt wird, während die Oberstimmen über jeder Wiederholung desselben immer neue Variationen (die auch Couplets genannt werden) ausführen. Mitunter wird dann das Bassthema selbst auch variiert, mit Diminutionen ausgeschmückt, gebrochen, auch aus Dur in Moll und umgekehrt versetzt, aber seine Ausdehnung hinsichts der Taktzahl soll immer dieselbe bleiben. Zuweilen intermittiert es auch für eine kurze Zeit, kommt dann aber alsbald wieder zum Vorschein; der Satz duldet manche Freiheiten, „l'on tolere bien des choses à cause de cette contrainte, qui ne seraient pas regulièrement permises dans une composition plus libre « (Brossard). Jedenfalls erfordert die Ciacone einen geschickten und an guten Einfallen reichen Contrapunctisten, wenn Matthesons’ Ausspruch, dass dergleichen Lustbarkeit allezeit mehr Ersättigung als Anmut gäbe, nicht in vollem Maasse [sic] gerechtfertigt werden soll. Wohl eins der merkwürdigsten Beispiele von Tonstücken dieser Gattung ist die Chacone von Händel (Deutsche Händelausg. II. 110-122), in welcher 62 Variationen über einen einfachen Bassgang gesetzt sind, und zwar ohne dass dieser auch nur ein einziges mal aussetzt oder die Tonart ändert; nur wenn er selbst variiert wird, weicht er von einzelnen Tonschritten ab. Wenngleich der Spass hier etwas weit getrieben scheint, muss man doch die geistvolle Arbeit und die ungemeine Mannigfaltigkeit der Veränderungen bewundern. – Über die Ähnlichkeit und Verschiedenheit zwischen Chacone und Passacaglia s. den dem letzteren angehörenden Artikel. 28

**Passacaglia, Passecaille.** Ein der Ciacona nahe verwandtes Tanzstück von ernstem, aber angenehmen Character. Aehnlich jener besteht measure long, melodically, simply composed, and rhythmically well-marked bass theme is continuously repeated, while the upper voice over each iteration thereof continuously renders new variations (which are also called couplets). Occasionally the bass theme itself becomes varied, is embellished by diminutions, fragmented, and also transferred from major to minor and vice versa, but its dimension in regard to the number of measures should always remain the same. Sometimes it is also paused for a short time, but then resurfaces once again; the composition allows some freedom, "many other things are easily allowed which are not regularly permitted in a freer composition because of this restriction" (Brossard). In any case, the chaconne demands a skillful and inventive contrapuntist, when Mattheson’s dictum that such revelry has always given more oversaturation than gracefulness should not become fully justified. One of the most remarkable examples of musical works in this genre is the Chaconne by Händel (etc.), in which 62 variations are composed over a repeated simple bass, in such a way that this bass never pauses or changes its key. It only deviates from its proper pitches whenever it is varied. Even though things seem to have been carried a little too far here, one must still admire the masterly work and the remarkable diversity of the variations. About the similarities and differences between chaconne and passacaglia, see the latter article.

**Passacaglia.** Is closely related to the Chaconne, a dance piece of a serious, but pleasant character. Similarly to the chaconne,
der Passacaglio ebenfalls nicht aus Theilen oder Reprisen, sondern aus einem Bassthema von acht Takten, welches immer von neuem wiederholt wird, während die Oberstimmen immer neue, melodisch und rhythmisch verschiedene Contrapunkte und Veränderungen (die man auch Couplets nennt) darüber ausführen. Gewöhnlich wählt man einen ganz einfachen, aus längeren melodischen Hauptnoten ohne Durchgänge bestehenden Gesang, weil ein solcher recht mannigfaltige Figuren und Contrapunkte besser zulässt als wenn er selbst schon figurirt ist. Mattheson (Kern melod. Wissensch. 123) sagt zwar, dass der Passacaglio garnicht an ein festes Basssubject gebunden sei, doch ist dem nicht so; der berühmte Orgelpassacaglio von S. Bach (Orgelwerke von Griepenkerl Bd. I) führt dasselbe Bassthema unausgesetzt durch;
ebenso der in der VII. Suite von Händel (deutsche Händelausg. II. 51) befindliche. Für gewöhnlich steht er im ¾-Takt, wenn auch [sic] der ᵁ vorkommt, wie z. B. in dem eben erwähnten Händel’schen Tonsatze; er pflegt auf dem Niederschlage zu beginnen, kann aber auch im Aufschlage des letzten Viertels anheben. Ueber die Schnelligkeit seiner Bewegung sind die Erklärer verschiedener Meinung; Walther (Lex.) sagt, dass der Passacaglio ordinairement langsamer gehe als die Ciacona, die Melodie mattherziger (zärtlicher) und die Expression nicht so lebhaft sei. Dem schreibt auch Koch im a. L. nach, dass der Passacaglio in etwas langsamerer Bewegung als die Ciaconen vorgetragen werden müsse. Mattheson aber behauptet das directe Gegenteil; er setzt einen der Unterschiede zwischen diesen beiden Arten Tonstücken ausdrücklich darin, »dass die Chaconne langsamer und bedächtiger einhergehet, als die Passecaillle, nicht umgekehrt.« Ausserdem soll auch (nach Walther, Mattheson, Neueröffn. the passacaglia also exists not in movements or repetitions, but rather in a bass theme of eight measures, which always becomes newly repeated, while the upper voice always performs new melodic and rhythmic counterpoint and variations (which one also calls Couplets) above. Usually one selects a very simple melody, from longer melodic main notes without passing notes, because this allows for more diverse figurations and contrapuntal treatment. Even though Mattheson (from Kern melodischer Wissenschaft, 123) claims that the passacaglia is not at all bound to a solid bass subject, but it is not so; the famous organ passacaglia by J. S. Bach (Orgelwerke von Griepenkerl Band I) carries the same bass theme constantly throughout; similarly the piece contained in the VII. Suite by Händel (deutsche Händelausgabe, II, 51). For it usually remains in 3-4 time, even though alla breve occurs, for example in the aforementioned Händel piece; he likes to begin on the downbeat, but can also advance on the upbeat of the last quarter. About the speed of its movement theorists have different opinions; Walther (Lexicon) says, that the passacaglia ordinarily moves slower than the chaconne, the tender melody and the expression is not as lively. This opinion is followed by Koch in the Lexicon. He writes that the passacaglia needs to be executed at a somewhat slower tempo than the chaconne. But Mattheson asserts the direct opposite: he sets a difference between either explicit species of musical work therein, “that the chaconne moves slower and more steadily than the passacaglia, not the reverse.” Moreover, the passacaglia should also (after Walther, Mattheson, Neueröffn. Orch 185) be in the minor key, the chaconne in the major key, which, however, one does not always find confirmed; and that [the passacaglia] has a “more grave and delicate
Orch. 185) der Passacaglio die Molltonart, die Ciacone hingegen die Durtonart lieben, was man nicht immer bestätigt findet; und jener eine »gravitätischere und delicatere Singart« und mehr melodische Annehmlichkeit als diese haben. Zum Singen, wie die Ciacone, ist der Passacaglio niemalsgebraucht worden. Uebrigens sind beide die grössten unter den Tanzstücken.29

These definitions reveal a fairly clear understanding of the differences between chaconne and passacaglia, although this is just one person’s opinion on the matter. Koch’s citation of other sources who disagreed with his own interpretation reveals his awareness of the discrepancies within generic definitions. Table 2.2 attempts to summarize some conclusions based on Koch’s definitions and the differences cited within his entries.

TABLE 2.2. Differences and similarities between passacaglia and chaconne

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Koch’s Lexicon: Passacaglia</th>
<th>Chaconne</th>
<th>Comments/disagreements from other sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Similarities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dance</td>
<td>• Dance</td>
<td>• Instances of duple in the passacaglia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Triple meter</td>
<td>• Triple meter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Four or eight measures</td>
<td>• Four or eight measures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bass may be varied</td>
<td>• Bass may be varied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Differences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Slower</td>
<td>• Faster</td>
<td>• Mattheson argues the reverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• More somber character</td>
<td>• Livelier character</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Minor key</td>
<td>• Major key</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately, it is impossible to define these genres conclusively, but the many variants and trends should be considered as part of a larger, diverse tradition with which Brahms was familiar.  

29 Ibid., 670.
Having established a basic understanding of the different uses of *basso ostinato*, Brahms’s fascination and application of the device can be explored.

**Brahms and the Bass**

Brahms expressed a special regard for the bass, or lowest sounding part, as holding a particularly important role in his compositions. He stated on more than one occasion that the bass was the most essential part of a theme, an ideal that has great bearing on the subject of this thesis. In an 1856 letter to Joseph Joachim, Brahms wrote: “I occasionally reflect on variation form and find that it must be kept stricter, purer. The [old composers] retained the bass of the theme, their actual theme, strictly throughout.”31 Later in 1869, writing to music critic Adolf Schubring, Brahms stated: “[I]n a theme for [a set of] variations, it is almost only the bass that actually has any meaning for me. But this is sacred to me, it is the firm foundation on which I then build my stories.”32 These statements establish Brahms’s predilection for the bass voice (and therefore, the harmonic structure), but more importantly, root this predilection in a reverence for “old composers.”

The significance of the bass voice in Brahms’s music suggests why Brahms incorporated *basso ostinato* so frequently in his music. Table 2.3 contains a list of pieces by Brahms that use *basso ostinato* as a form or as an incidental device. The list is not exhaustive; it refers only to Brahms’s instrumental works, and demonstrates the widespread use of *basso ostinato* throughout his oeuvre.

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TABLE 2.3. List of Brahms’s instrumental works that utilize basso ostinato

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opus</th>
<th>Title of Composition</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Notable Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major, ii, Andante</td>
<td>1852-1853</td>
<td>Variation form, in which the <em>basso ostinato</em> is presented monophonically as the primary theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Piano Sonata No. 2 in F# minor, ii, Andante con espressione</td>
<td>1852</td>
<td>The <em>basso ostinato</em> here is treated freely throughout the movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann</td>
<td>1854</td>
<td>Variation 16 is a passacaglia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>String Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, ii, Andante</td>
<td>1859-1860</td>
<td>The movement is a chaconne based on the melodic-harmonic structure of “La folia.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Variations on a Theme by Handel</td>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Variations 13 and 19 use <em>basso ostinato</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn (“Chorale St. Antonii”)</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>The Finale is structured as a passacaglia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>Symphony No. 4 in E minor, iv, Allegro energico e passionato</td>
<td>1884-1885</td>
<td>The fourth movement is famously in the form of a passacaglia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115</td>
<td>Clarinet Quintet in B minor, iv, Con moto</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td><em>Basso ostinato</em> occurs freely throughout.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120, #2</td>
<td>Clarinet Sonata No. 2 in E-flat major, iii, Andante con moto</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Incidental use of <em>basso ostinato</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2.3 shows, *basso ostinato* is present in Brahms’s work from his first opus to near the end of his life. It also appears across all of the instrumental genres in which he wrote, from his solo piano works to his final symphony.

Brahms’s first two opera in this Table are so unique in their treatment of the bass, that they merit discussion here. Some of Brahms’s later variation sets also include sections of *basso ostinato*.

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33 Table 1 is based on compilations of Brahms’s instrumental works with variation forms by: Julian Littlewood, *The Variations of Johannes Brahms* (London: Plumbago Books, 2004) and Elaine Sisman, “Brahms and the Variation Canon,” *19th-Century Music* 14, no. 2 (1990): 144. The table excludes vocal works, such as the *Liebeslieder-Walzer* that exhibit *bassi ostinati*. 
**Ostinato.** The two piano sonatas, No. 1 in C major, Opus 1 (1853) and No. 2 in F# minor, Opus 2 (1854), share similarities between their second movements, which use *basso ostinato* incidentally. These two sonatas are closely connected to the beginning of Brahms’s relationship with Robert and Clara Schumann. When Brahms walked into the Schumann household in the fall of 1853, the first composition that he played for the Schumanns was the Piano Sonata in C major.34

Robert Schumann, thoroughly impressed by what he heard from the young composer, launched Brahms’s career by publishing “Neue Bahnen,” his glowing appraisal of the rising composer, in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. “Neue Bahnen” appeared within a month after Brahms showed up on the Schumanns’ doorstep, and hailed Brahms as a messianic composer, destined to usher in “new paths.”35 The platform for Schumann’s essay, the *Neue Zeitschrift*, would ironically become the vehicle for the New German School under Schumann’s successor, Franz Brendel. In its formative years, however, the journal’s statement of purpose read:

> To be remindful of older times and their works and to emphasize that only from such a pure source can new artistic beauties be fostered; at the same time to oppose the trends of the more recent past, proceeding from mere virtuosity, and, finally, to prepare the way for, and to hasten, the acceptance of a new poetic era.36

This statement by Schumann makes it clear that he, too, would have subscribed to Eliot’s sense of tradition. It is not surprising then, that Schumann was deeply impressed by the two piano sonatas, each of which displayed audible connections to tradition and earlier music. In “Neue Bahnen,” Schumann referred to the piano sonatas as “veiled symphonies,” high praise, indeed, for the twenty-year old composer.

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35 “Neue Bahnen” was published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 39, no. 18 (October 28, 1853).
36 Ibid., 83. This was issued in an early edition of the journal in 1834.
Brahms deliberately chose the Sonata in C major and the Sonata in F# minor to be his first and second opus. The significance lies in the genre itself; at this time, the piano sonata was changing to a programmatic or fantasy sonata. Brahms’s piano sonatas return to the large-scale genre that was used by Beethoven and Schubert, establishing from the beginning of his career that he would always have one eye turned towards his predecessors.\(^{37}\)

The piano sonatas constitute the earliest examples of variations by Brahms that use *basso ostinato*, although only briefly. Both second movements are linked through their use of German lieder as their primary melodic source. While neither movement uses a strict *basso ostinato* that repeats continuously—or nearly so—throughout the movement, the emphasis of the lower voice and the frequent appearance of the primary theme in the bass are nascent examples of a technique that Brahms would use again in his variation sets, Sextet No. 1, and the Haydn Variations.

The second movement of First Piano Sonata in C major, Opus 1, uses a melody borrowed from an anthology called *Deutsche Volkslieder*, compiled by August Kretzschmer and Anton Wilhelm von Zuccalmaglio in 1840. In the *Deutsche Volkslieder*, every other line of the text is indicated “Alle” (all), while the other stanzas alternate with “Vorsänger” (leader) (Example 2.6). At the beginning of the second movement in Brahms’s First Piano Sonata, the text is also written underneath the stave, and includes the vocal-force designations of “Vorsänger”/Solo and “Alle”/Chorus.

EXAMPLE 2.6. From *Deutsche Volkslieder*, No. 36

As seen in Example 2.7, Brahms created a harmonization for the sections marked “Alle,” creating a vocal, responsorial effect in the opening of the movement. Brahms used only the first four measures of the lied as thematic material, creating a twelve-measure phrase in bar form (AAB). Bar form itself was a form associated with medieval and Renaissance German Minnelieder, used sometimes in the nineteenth-century lied.

As the movement proceeds, becoming more removed from the original material with each subsequent variation, the original theme remains almost unaltered in the bass. It appears four times in its original form in the bass, and additionally moves to the upper voice—something that could occur in a passacaglia by some definitions. The bass theme appears once in the major mode, another trait common with the passacaglia. The movement concludes with an *attacca* to the Scherzo movement.

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39 Littlewood, *The Variations of Johannes Brahms*, 118. Wagner famously used this form in *Die Meistersinger*, as a deliberate association with older German lieder.

\section*{Andante.}
(Nach einem altdeutschen Minnelied)

\begin{center}
\begin{figure}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example2.7}
\end{figure}
\end{center}

The second movement of the Piano Sonata No. 2 in F# minor, Opus 2 (Example 2.8), is similar to the second movement of the First Sonata. It is modeled after a Minnelied by Kraft von Toggenburg, called “Mir ist leide.” It follows bar form and uses the initial theme throughout the bass.\footnote{The poem translates to: “It is painful to me/that winter/has made fallow/both forest and heath;/its firm grip allows/both flowers to bloom/nor birds to sing/their very sweet songs.” Translation from George S. Bozarth, “Poetic’ Andantes of the Piano Sonatas,” in \textit{Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives}, ed. George S. Bozarth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 355.} As in the second movement of the First Sonata, the bass theme is transformed to the major mode and different registers of the piano. The movement ends with a direct \textit{attacca} to the third movement, a Scherzo that echoes the thematic material of the bass theme.
EXAMPLE 2.8. Brahms, Piano Sonata No. 2 in F# minor, Opus 2, ii. Measures 1-18 contain the initial statement of the theme.\(^{42}\)

The piano sonatas by Brahms offer a glimpse into his fascination with both tradition and the lowest voice. These first sonatas display early tendencies towards \textit{basso ostinato} that would manifest in later works for solo piano and other ensembles.

CHAPTER III. SEXTET NO. 1 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OPUS 18

Brahms figured in one of the nineteenth century’s most polarizing episode: the so-called “Music of the Future” controversy. The well-known controversy sparked two factions, the “New German School,” who supported program music, and those who supported absolute music. Communication was at the center of the debate, whose opposing sides saw music as either an abstract vehicle for expression, or a deliberate joining of music and meaning through extramusical devices.¹ Brahms was at the center of the absolute camp, in direct opposition to the Franz Liszt and Franz Brendel—staunch advocates for program music.² In a rare instance of public confrontation, Brahms and his supporters attempted to challenge Liszt and Brendel’s “Music of the Future,” by drumming support through a published and signed petition. The petition failed, to Brahms’s dismay and the opposition’s delight. When it was published in 1860, it featured only a handful of signatures (including Brahms’s), making it seem like a weak attempt from the minority to oppose the self-proclaimed “New German School.”

While Brahms remained verbally silent after his short-lived public opposition to the “New German School,” the amount of chamber music that he wrote during this time, and long afterwards, belied his silent position. Chamber music was a declining medium during the surge of program music. Brahms’s response was to write chamber music in many forms: string quartets, piano trios, and string sextets. The string sextet was an unusual choice, because it was far from being the most prominent chamber ensemble during the nineteenth century. It is difficult to name any well-known examples of the genre from the nineteenth century, with the exception of Brahms’s two sextets, sextets by Spohr, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, and Schoenberg’s

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² Taruskin and Weiss, *Music in the Western World*, 328.
Verklärte Nacht, which falls at the end of the nineteenth century. The string sextet is comprised of two violins, two violas, and two cellos, creating a full texture that allows the composer to emphasize the bass. This provided Brahms with a perfect vehicle to feature the backwards-looking device of the basso ostinato, which appears as a chaconne in the second movement of his Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18 (1860). The Sextet has received attention by scholars for the atypical genre and the use of chaconne by several scholars. I will contribute my own analysis of the Sextet, dealing with aspects that both reflect the tradition of chaconne writing and Brahms’s adaptation of the form.

While the second movement of Brahms’s Sextet in B-flat major will be analyzed thoroughly as pertinent to this thesis, the other movements provide insight into the Sextet as a whole (see Table 3.1). I have singled out the second movement as relevant to my discussion of Brahms and the basso ostinato, but this distinctly Baroque feature does not ostracize the second movement from stylistic and organic unity with the first, third, and fourth movements. These movements are not without references to the past, although not as obvious as the chaconne in the second movement.

TABLE 3.1. Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, outline of movements

I. Allegro ma non troppo
II. Andante, ma moderato
III. Scherzo. Allegro molto
IV. Rondo

For a comprehensive list of sextets composed in the nineteenth century, as well as the implications of such an ensemble, see Michael Wackerbauer, Sextett, Doppelquartett und Oktett: Studien zur gross besetzten Kamermusik für Streicher im 19 Jahrhundert (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 2008).
The first movement is quite Brahmsian in its treatment of melody, unexpected harmonies, and rhythmic complexity, involving syncopation, metrical shifts, and asymmetrical phrasing. The instrumentation of the string sextet allows the bass to have an even more important role as dual harmonic and melodic support for the upper strings. Some of the most noteworthy sections of the first movement include moments of note-against-note counterpoint between voices (Example 3.1).

EXAMPLE 3.1. Brahms, Sextet No. 1, Opus 18, i, mm. 361-379. Counterpoint between the first viola and cello

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In Example 3.1, cello I and viola I begin with a 1:1 duet, accompanied by violin II. The counterpoint between the cello and viola is completely consonant until the addition of viola II in measure 371. Still, the duet is reminiscent of an earlier style, mostly consonant and in rhythmic unison. At other points within this movement, the texture and counterpoint hint at Brahms’s earlier influences. This section occurs close to the end of the movement, and appropriately prepares the listener for the second movement, based on the melodic-harmonic structure of the folia.

In the third movement, Brahms returns to his rhythmic tricks, in a scherzo that uses the rhythmic emphasis of a Ländler.\(^5\) The final movement firmly establishes the organic unity that shapes the Sextet through thematic cyclicism, which I will address later in this chapter.

The second movement is stately and grave, providing the most gravitas out of all four movements in the sextet. It was undoubtedly close to Brahms’s heart, because he sent Clara Schumann a version of the movement for solo piano, Opus 18b. The second movement fits within the sextet as the slow movement, in the mediant key area of D minor. The movement references both the Folia and the chaconne genres. As shown in examples 3.2a and 3.2b, the melody and harmony are clearly based on “La folia,” and the \textit{basso ostinato} fulfills the expectations of Nelson’s dual melodic and harmonic variations discussed in Chapter Two.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example32a.png}
\caption{“La folia” as it appears in Corelli’s Violin Sonata Op. 5, No. 12 in D minor}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example32b.png}
\caption{“La folia” as it appears in Corelli’s Violin Sonata Op. 5, No. 12 in D minor}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{5} Michael Musgrave, \textit{The Music of Brahms} (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 91. Musgrave finds similarities between this movement and Schubert’s use of Ländler.
\end{footnote}
EXAMPLE 3.2b. Primary theme from Brahms’s Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii

Although modeled after the folia, the second movement could also be called a chaconne. It follows the expectations of the chaconne (minor key and harmonically-driven *basso ostinato*). The presentation of the theme and *basso ostinato* is in two eight-bar phrases, making a sixteen-bar motive with written-out repeats totaling thirty-two measures. As discussed in Chapter II, the chaconne is defined in H. C. Koch’s dictionary as being in triple meter and usually major mode, and Brahms’s chaconne is here in duple meter and minor mode. Bach’s Chaconne for Violin, BWV 1004, is also in D minor, however, so the case of minor mode chaconnes is far from unprecedented. Corelli’s “La folia” is also in D minor, but in triple meter. The use of duple meter in Brahms’s chaconne is a departure from the norm, although it is not the only exception. With the second movement of the First Sextet, Brahms formed a hybrid movement that blended aspects of the folia with traditional elements of a chaconne.

One way in which Brahms follows an earlier model is in the domain of phrase structure. Phrase irregularities, typical of Brahms and expected after the phrase abnormalities of the first movement, do not occur in the second movement of Opus 18. Brahms adheres strictly to the symmetrical phrase lengths of eight and sixteen bars, which—apart from the use of chaconne itself—is the most distinctly historical reference in Brahms’s work. The only instances of irregular phrasing in the movement occur in the coda, which begins with a phrase overlap. As

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6 See Chapter II for other examples of chaconne and passacaglia in duple meter.
phrase overlaps go, however, it is an exceedingly mild interruption to the symmetrical eight-bar phrase structure established by the rest of the piece. If one is eagerly awaiting any Brahmsian phrase irregularities, they will be disappointed in this overlap, which occurs naturally over the final cadence. Although the sixteen-measure coda is grouped 6+6+4, even this irregular division is tame in comparison to the asymmetrical phrasing of the first movement, and countless other instances in Brahms’s work.

Another way in which Brahms recreates a traditional chaconne is the harmonic progression, in the way it closely resembles that of Corelli’s (in his “La folia” violin sonata) and avoids extreme chromaticism for most of the movement.

EXAMPLE 3.3. Comparison of harmonic progression of the themes in Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii, top, and Corelli, Opus 5, no. 12, bottom

As Example 3.3 shows, the first phrase in both cases emphasizes the raised scale-degree six and the lowered leading-tone, hinting at Dorian mode. Both Brahms’s and Corelli’s first phrases present an emphasis on III, and a more satisfying Roman numeral analysis is attained by considering this a brief tonicization of III. While Corelli’s “La folia” is a parallel period with a nearly identical harmonic and melodic structure, Brahms’s version has an antecedent-consequent phrase that creates more contrast in the consequent phrase, which includes a brief tonicization of the dominant, A major. There is nothing unusual or innovative about Brahms’s harmonic
progression in the presentation of the theme; however, it is the subtle changes made during the variations that require closer attention.

The theme itself is characterized by ascending motion that fills out the span of a fifth (Example 3.4). The melodic descent occurs only in the last three measures of the theme, and consequently, the melodic ascent dominates the theme. Brahms prolongs the ascent through motion from an inner voice.

EXAMPLE 3.4. Primary theme from Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii, melodic outline of a fifth

Having discussed the first presentation of the theme in terms of harmonic and melodic characteristics, phrase length, and similarity to Corelli’s “La folia,” I will address the second movement of the B-flat major Sextet by each variation. The first variation (mm. 33-48, with double repeats) begins with sixteenth-note diminutions of the theme in cello I. This variation boasts the thinnest texture of the entire movement, beginning with just cellos and viola. The texture expands starting at measure 37, bringing the texture to all six voices at the half cadence. No harmonic changes occur in the first phrase of the variation, although two chords exchange inversions to alter the direction of the bass line.

The second phrase of the first variation alters the harmony for the first time (see Example 3.5). In the sixth bar of the phrase, the G-natural is eliminated and the G# is harmonized by a viiº7/V instead of a V6-5/V. The harmonic substitution of a diminished-seventh chord is not as significant as the way in which Brahms deals with the six-part texture. While the antecedent phrase of the first variation was fairly simple in texture, the consequent phrase hosts fragments of
the melodic variations in the five uppermost voices, moving through a broad tessitura that goes beyond the range of the individual instruments in a sextet.

EXAMPLE 3.5. Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii, mm. 41-48

The second variation explores imitation rather than range in sextuplet diminutions. The violins lead the violas, which closely imitate the theme as presented by the violins. The cellos are reduced to their smallest role in the movement, playing almost exclusively the bass notes with occasional harmonic support. An additional bass note, the lowered seventh scale degree, is added on the downbeat of the fourth bar, which delays the complete arrival of vii°7/V on the second beat. The added C creates a lovely counterpoint with the A-flat appoggiatura in the first violin.

The second phrase of the second variation likewise remains relatively unchanged in terms of harmony. It continues the sextuplet diminution of the theme in imitation between the violins and violas, while the cellos retain their accompanimental role. Its most distinct Brahmsian feature is the polyrhythm between the violas and the violins. It is the third variation that begins to deviate from expectations or norms.

The third variation continues the increasing rhythmic diminutions, now in sextuplets. The most notable feature, however, is the alteration of the basso ostinato in the lowest voices, which

\[\text{\textsuperscript{7} Johannes Brahms, } \textit{Johannes Brahms: Sämtliche Werke, Band 7, 17.}\]
has been almost entirely dissolved in the presentation of ascending and descending scales.

Hitherto, Brahms had taken advantage of the six-voiced ensemble and never doubled the parts in the cellos. In this third variation, not only do the cellos double each other (almost exactly), the harmonic language they generate is the most dissonant section of the entire movement. The upper strings, violins and violas, play minimally during this variation, shifting the focus of the texture to the cellos. Both the theme and the basso ostinato are all but lost in this variation, hidden within the chromaticism and texture of this section.

The melodic ascent that characterizes the theme is challenged by the third variation, with contrasting gestures in the upper strings and the juxtaposition of registers. The scales played by the cellos provide some ascending motion as their starting point rises. The second phrase of this variation emphatically provides a melodic ascent through the bass, which rises by a half- or whole-step on each beat until the variation cadences. Just as in the original theme, the ascending bass notes fill out the span of a fifth, from D to A.

Although the movement is not revolutionary in terms of chromaticism, the third variation holds a few moments worthy of mention. The first measure of the second phrase (m. 73, in Example 3.6) is noteworthy in that it contains all twelve pitches. The unexpected chromatic saturation, achieved by juxtaposing a D harmonic minor scale to a D-flat major scale, is perhaps the most startling and dissonant moment of the entire sextet, and helps build to the climax of the third variation, before the movement directly modulates to the parallel key, D major.
EXAMPLE 3.6. Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii, variation III, mm. 73-75

The fourth and fifth variations are in D major. The *basso ostinato* in the first phrase of the fourth variation remains similar to the previous statements, with slight alterations that result from both the change of mode and a modified approach to the half cadence. The thematic material bears resemblance to the initial theme, as seen in Example 3.7, but is presented without diminutions, giving it the weight of a secondary theme that is partially derived from the primary theme.

EXAMPLE 3.7. Comparison of primary (a) and secondary (b) themes in Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii

The secondary theme in D major descends to scale-degree 2 at the half cadence, in contrast to the primary theme, which ascends to scale-degree 5 at the half cadence. Otherwise, both themes

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8 Ibid., 20.
show clear similarities; yet, the change in contour seems enough to qualify the D major theme as a secondary theme.

The second phrase of the fourth variation features a new harmonic progression and theme. As previously discussed, the span from D to A is a defining characteristic of the primary theme. In this new theme, the span from A to D, a perfect fourth, is filled chromatically. The new harmonic progression, shown in Example 3.8, is achieved through the chromatic line in the upper voice and a slightly altered bass voice that intensifies the movement as it reaches its climax before winding down for the end.

EXAMPLE 3.8. Reduction of harmonic progression in Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii, Variation IV

Cello I and viola II play running eighth notes throughout this phrase, while violin II and viola I play the theme. The instrumentation at this point creates a new timbral effect, because the viola plays in the octave above the violin.

The fifth variation, the final variation in D major, eliminates the *basso ostinato* in the first phrase through tacet cellos. The lowest sounding instrument in this variation is viola II, which plays a pedal D until the half cadence. The static harmony in this phrase is a needed pause after the intensity built through the ascending chromatic line at the conclusion of variation four. The fifth variation, once again, presents new thematic material, which I will revisit when I discuss the far-reaching motivic connections throughout all four movements of the Sextet. A fragmented
version of the *basso ostinato* returns for the second phrase of the fifth variation, before the D major section draws to a close.

The sixth and final variation is thinly scored, with a return to the original form of the primary theme against the original harmonic progression. Both the theme and the *basso ostinato* are contained within the cellos, while the violins and violas play simple, accompanimental figures. The coda is equally simple in texture and over a D pedal, although there is more interplay between each part, as one melodic fragment is repeated at various pitch levels. The coda coyly shifts between D major and D minor before arriving at its serene conclusion in the key of D major.

What I consider most remarkable about this Sextet is the integration of the second movement within the entire Sextet. The first, third, and fourth movements do not reference such a classically-rooted form as the chaconne, creating the issue of cohesion within all four movements. The second movement’s chaconne establishes a significant gap in style between the other movements, due to its nature as a more restricted form and the repetition of the bass, which is a constant reminder of the form and associated style. When listening to the Sextet, however, the transitions into and from the second movement are not unsettling, nor does the foray into an older style create any disunity between the other movements.

Unity and balance between the different styles assimilated within the Sextet are achieved through a subtle, yet effective use of organic thematicism, in which certain events recur across the entire Sextet. This motivic organicism blends the overtly historical chaconne within the cyclicism of Brahms’s thematic material and more idiomatic nineteenth-century styles. The resulting interconnectedness of each movement beautifully demonstrates a historical awareness and a synthesis of the past and present in one entity. In true Eliot fashion, the Sextet
simultaneously uses disparate musical idioms; yet, the traditional elements are not in blind imitation, as demonstrated in the second movement of the Sextet, which breaks from standard forms of the chaconne.

A look at the Sextet as an entire unit demonstrates the ways in which Brahms creates unity within the movements, and lightens the contrast of the chaconne by creating motivic parallels to other movements. In the broadest sense, the first and fourth movements create a sense of cyclicism through their respective primary themes (see Examples 3.9a-b).

EXAMPLE 3.9a. Primary theme from Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, i

EXAMPLE 3.9b. Primary theme from Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, iv

The primary theme from the first movement is noted by Schoenberg in “Brahms the Progressive” for its phrase structure. The nine-measure phrase is, as Schoenberg notes, asymmetrical and contributes to Brahms’s identity as a progressive composer. Not only does the primary theme of the fourth movement closely resemble the theme from the first movement, but it also appears truncated to a symmetrical phrase length of eight measures. Example 3.10 aligns the related material between both themes in order to demonstrate how one theme is derived from the other.
Rhythmically, the theme from the first movement is challenging not only because of its asymmetry, but also because of the grouping of phrases which conflicts with the designated triple meter. The theme would be more rhythmically intuitive if it appeared in duple, and indeed, it is easily counted in duple meter, until the final note of the phrase. The recomposition in Example 3.11, which merely alters the time signature from 3/4 to 2/4, shows that although the phrase groupings are still irregular, duple meter supports the theme more naturally than triple meter.

This theme is transformed when it appears in the fourth movement to fit a more normalized phrase rhythm, completely resolving the conflict between theme and phrase built in the first movement. Even the time signature of the fourth movement, in duple meter, reflects this transformation to a normative, symmetrical version of the theme.

A final observation about the Sextet’s organicism relates to the secondary motive in the first movement (Examples 3.12a-c). The first movement’s secondary theme is characterized by a dotted-quarter-note, eighth-note rhythm. This motive is transformed and fragmented at mm.
115ff. (and later at mm. 341ff.), now becoming a more static theme, limited by its neighbor-note motion. In turn, this neighbor-note motive becomes part of the second movement, during the absence of both the first and second themes of the movement. Even the scoring contains striking similarities. The viola holds the motive in both movements, while the first violin has an embellishing figure of a simple descending octave.

EXAMPLE 3.12a. Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, i. Secondary theme from the first movement as it appears in violin I, mm. 61-68

EXAMPLE 3.12b. Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, i. First movement’s secondary theme transformed, as it appears in violin I, mm. 115-122

EXAMPLE 3.12c. Brahms, Sextet No. 1 in B-flat major, Opus 18, ii. Comparison of the D major theme from the second movement that is derived from the first movement’s secondary theme. Phrase a is mm. 113-120 as a simplified version of its appearance in viola I. Phrase b is mm. 121-128 as a simplified version of its appearance in viola I.

Sextet No. 1 is a remarkable example of Brahms’s coexistence with tradition and the present. He demonstrated knowledge of chaconne and folia procedures, but also used original
techniques to create an interesting inner movement that fits within the entire Sextet. The second movement is organically folded within the entire work, negating the possible stylistic incongruity that the inclusion of this movement might have created. The progressive qualities of the phrasing in the first movement in addition to the cyclicism of the Sextet as a whole, contributes to the notion that Brahms was capable of embracing the past and its traditions, while developing his own unique identity as a composer. By Burkholder’s definition of musical modernism—“music written by composers obsessed with the musical past and with their place in music history”9—the Sextet is modernist, although its compositional date (1860) would suggest otherwise.

The Sextet is not a frantic reproduction of older styles, but a case of respectful allusion to a tradition to which Brahms belonged. Undeniably, the second movement stands on its own as a poignant piece that evokes deep emotion. The most indisputable evidence of its evocative aesthetic quality is the second movement’s crowning achievement in reducing a Vulcan—belonging to a race defined by suppressed emotion—to tears. On this, I close my case.10

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9 Burkholder, “Brahms and Twentieth-Century Classical Music,” 76-77. His full definition can be found in Chapter I.
10 The Sextet is featured diegetically in Star Trek: The Next Generation, Season Three, Episode 23, “Sarek,” and brings Spock’s father, Sarek, to tears.
CHAPTER IV. VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF JOSEPH HAYDN, OPUS 56A

The Variations on a Theme of Joseph Haydn, Opus 56a (1873) is a set of orchestral variations based on a theme from a Divertimento for Winds that was at the time mistakenly attributed to Haydn.¹ The theme that Brahms used as the basis for his set is entitled “Chorale St. Antonii,” and likely precedes Haydn. Brahms originally envisioned the Variations as a two-piano version (which exists as Opus 56b), but chose to orchestrate the set as well. The choice of piano duo echoes the keyboard chorale variations from the seventeenth century, with notable examples by Scheidt, Sweelinck, Buxtehude, and J. S. Bach. An orchestrated chorale variation set, however, was an anomaly—the Haydn Variations as a genre are the first known independent orchestral variations to date.² Ideas of tradition and progress will be investigated and expanded upon throughout this chapter, further demonstrating that the Haydn Variations look both backwards and forwards.

Although Opus 56b is a valuable work of its own accord, the implications of the orchestral variations are pertinent to notions of tradition and progress. Opus 56a holds the explicitly progressive quality of its position as the first independent orchestral variations, but it also exhibits some of Brahms’s progressive compositional traits as defined by Schoenberg. An example of this is the first ten measures of the theme itself, which is comprised of two five-measure phrases. The Finale, which concludes in a sixteen-variation passacaglia, reiterates the first five-measure phrase for its duration, even further emphasizing the atypical asymmetrical phrase length.

¹ Julian Littlewood, The Variations of Johannes Brahms, 106. C. F. Pohl introduced Brahms to Haydn’s Divertimento for Winds in B-flat major, Hob. II:46, of which the second movement is entitled “Chorale St. Antonii.” The Divertimento is now generally thought to be by Haydn’s student, Ignaz Pleyel. Karl Geiringer, On Brahms and His Circle: Essays and Documentary Studies, rev. George S. Bozarth (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2006), 197n7.
² Jan Swafford, Johannes Brahms, 380.
At the deepest level, though, the Haydn Variations are steeped in tradition. The new genre of the orchestral variation arose from a staple genre of keyboard music, spanning from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. Before Brahms, keyboard variations had reached a new height in the works of Beethoven and Schumann; Brahms himself, however, was no stranger to keyboard variations by the time he wrote Opus 56. Although the transfer of the keyboard variation to the orchestral medium was a slight shift, Brahms opened the door for many other composers of the modernist tradition to follow.

Notably, Arnold Schoenberg’s Variations for Orchestra, Opus 31 (1928) and Anton Webern’s Variations for Orchestra, Opus 30 (1940)—both twelve-tone works—use passacaglia.\(^3\) Webern’s first opus, Passacaglia (1908), is a single-movement orchestral passacaglia that he wrote under Schoenberg’s tutelage. Although Webern’s Passacaglia is in extended tonality and far-removed from the harmonic language of Brahms, it is completely different from Webern’s later style. Schoenberg’s Variations for Orchestra recall Brahms’s Haydn Variations through the wide-ranging character and tempo changes of each variation. Even more convincingly, Schoenberg's Variations emphasize the woodwinds, which is a particular feature of Brahms’s Haydn Variations that will be explored later in this chapter.

\(^3\) Nelson separates the Haydn Variations from later orchestral variations (such as Franck’s Variations symphoniques and Elgar’s Enigma Variations) on the basis that the Haydn Variations are character variations, while later variations fall under the “free variation” category. Nelson defines character variations as variations that follow a sectional pattern and use a different mode of expression or character for each variation. Free variations, according to Nelson, emerged after the Haydn Variations and are less rigorous in structure and development. Nelson, The Technique of Variation, 112ff. For more on the use of passacaglia in Schoenberg Opus 31, see Marija Beni Zovko, “Twelve-Tone Technique and Its Forms: Variation Techniques of Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘Variations for Orchestra Op. 31,’” International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music 38, no. 1 (2007): 39-53 and Ethan Haimo, “Redating Schoenberg’s Passacaglia for Orchestra,” Journal of the American Musicological Society 40, no. 3 (1987): 471-494.
The date of composition, 1873, certainly stands out in its proximity to the completion of Brahms’s First Symphony in 1876. At this time, Brahms had already composed a large portion of his chamber music, large-scale vocal works with orchestra, and major piano works (with the exception of his later piano sets). His previous orchestral works—the two serenades and the first piano concerto—had been composed more than one decade prior to the Haydn Variations. Following the Haydn Variations, Brahms would complete four symphonies and all of his remaining orchestral works in just over a decade. It is well known that Brahms suffered from the “anxiety of influence” that preoccupied many composers after Beethoven. He had also emerged on the less popular side of the “Music of the Future” controversy, and did not write symphonic poems as a refuge from the overwhelming gravity associated with the genre of the symphony. In this light, the Haydn Variations may be viewed as a calculated move to write a serious orchestral work outside the genres of symphony and symphonic poem.

Rather than write in the “progressive” style of the symphonic poem, Brahms deliberately used the symphonic style to reference an older idiom that was primarily associated with the keyboard. His move to orchestrate the Haydn Variations was encouraged by his publisher, Fritz Simrock, and his close advisors, including Clara Schumann. Leading up to this, Brahms

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4 Brodbeck suggests that in addition to alluding to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony Finale, the theme from Brahms’s Fourth Symphony, fourth movement, alludes to Bach’s Cantata, BWV 106, “Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit” (Actus Tragicus). The significance of Brodbeck’s assertion is that a *basso ostinato* in Bach’s Cantata is the allusory source. David Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68-69.


expressed that he had been vigorously studying counterpoint. In a letter to Clara Schumann in April 1872, he wrote:

All winter long I have been doing counterpoint exercises very assiduously! What for? To be better able to disparage my pretty things—for that it wasn’t necessary. To become a university professor—also not. To learn to write music better—that too I’m not hoping for. But still it’s somewhat tragic when in the end, one gets to be cleverer than is useful.7

Whether Brahms’s casual remarks about the purpose of his study can be taken at face value or as an indication of his self-deprecating attitude is uncertain. Considering the backwards-looking nature of the Haydn Variations and its place within Brahms’s output, it is more than probable that his study of counterpoint did indeed improve his compositional prowess. Brahms’s study of counterpoint began during his early friendship with the Schumanns in 1855, when he turned to an autodidactic pursuit of contrapuntal techniques.8 He told Joachim on one occasion: “When I do not feel like composing I write some counterpoint.”9 Later, in 1873, the fruits of his labor would be harvested when he utilized his contrapuntal skills in writing the Haydn Variations.

As one of Brahms’s most important orchestral works prior to the symphonies, the Haydn Variations paved the way for the completion of Brahms’s First Symphony. According to Kalbeck, Brahms famously told Hermann Levi in 1870: “I will never compose a symphony! You have no notion how dispiriting it is for one of us when he constantly hears such a giant marching

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behind him.”¹⁰ Between the time of this remark and the completion of the C-minor Symphony, Brahms made great strides in overcoming his trepidation. The Haydn Variations were the intervening episode that provided Brahms with the skill and confidence to achieve the next step of orchestral writing—the symphony. Given Brahms’s paralyzing symphonic anxiety, the Haydn Variations represent a metaphorical victory over what Harold Bloom might call his Oedipal instincts. Brahms embraced traditional elements in writing the Haydn Variations. These elements include his direct homage to Haydn, the use of variation and contrapuntal devices throughout, and the passacaglia of the Variations’ Finale.¹¹

Orchestral writing was not the only fear that Brahms confronted in 1873. During the summer, as he was composing the Haydn Variations, Brahms also worked towards the completion of his first two string quartets, Opus 51. While Brahms had previously written numerous chamber works, he had only used the more unconventional mediums of piano trio, piano quartet, and string sextet. The string quartets were begun around 1865, but took a substantial amount of time to reach completion. Beethoven’s shadow did not only dominate the symphonic world in the nineteenth century, but also the chamber music world in the realm of string quartets. Beethoven’s late string quartets had pushed the limits of the genre and were among his most mature and valued compositions. Naturally, Brahms was hesitant to contribute to the string quartet repertoire, but overcame this fear even as he wrote his first major orchestral

¹¹ Brodbeck suggests that Brahms was also influenced by Bach’s Cantata BWV 150, “Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich,” which concludes with a choral chaconne (marked “Ciaconna” in score). Bach bent the dance genre of chaconne by pairing it with a vocal ensemble and using the minor mode, two elements that contradict Koch’s definition of chaconne. Brodbeck, Brahms: Symphony No. 1, 67.
That the year 1873 was significant in Brahms’s maturation and his embrace of the past is made apparent through the music composed during that time.

The successful premiere of the Haydn Variations may have bolstered Brahms’s confidence. The performance itself was with the Court Opera Orchestra in the Great Hall of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, programmed with Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony, an uncertain work by Mozart, and the Overture to Schubert’s opera Alfonso und Estrella. The concert on November 2 opened the Philharmonic’s 1873-74 concert series, and was lauded by audiences and critics. This was a great opportunity for Brahms, who conducted the performance, to showcase the Variations to one of the best audiences in Vienna.

Eduard Hanslick, Brahms’s staunch supporter, attended the premiere and published a review of the work in which he praised Brahms’s arriving maturity: “Brahms seems to us now like a robust tree standing in full sap, whose green branches are stretching ever higher and wider, bearing ever more abundant, sweeter fruits.” Hanslick invokes J. S. Bach as a prevailing influence throughout the Haydn Variations, but he also acknowledges that “nowhere does this element push itself forward, constituting, as it were, only the solid deep foundation over which the silver stream of spontaneous, modern feelings and figures are in motion.” Hanslick notes both the traditional and the modern aspects of the Variations, then, although he gives but one example of a “daring” feature in the instrumentation: the use of a triangle. Hanslick adds some

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13 The playbill lists it simply as “Mozart, Sinfonie Nr. 5, D-dur.” McCorkle, Variations on a Theme of Haydn, 25.

14 Originally published in Die Neue freie Presse. Translated by Margit L. McCorkle, the review is included in McCorkle, Variations on a Theme of Haydn, 211-213.

15 Ibid., 212.
levity to the review, by saying that if a prize existed for a composer who is able to use the
piccolo and the triangle in a serious work without sounding “banal” or “coquettish,” Brahms
would win for the instrumentation of his Haydn Variations. Hanslick is also careful to point out
that Brahms achieves all of these things without leaning on a programmatic element. As an
ardent supporter of absolute music and of Brahms, Hanslick could not fail to make note of this in
his review of the Haydn Variations.

Although mentioned only briefly, Hanslick recognized a unity of tradition and progress
within the Haydn Variations that resulted in a masterful work. Brahms’s surrender to the
influence of his predecessors manifests itself through various elements in the Haydn Variations.
The most obvious is, of course, the allusion to the Divertimento for Winds allegedly composed
by Haydn. Brahms lifts the theme directly from the second movement, and uses it to generate
eight variations and a Finale. The Divertimento’s second movement (Example 4.1) is a short
rounded binary form in B-flat major, the key that Brahms also uses in his Variations.

EXAMPLE 4.1. Attributed to Haydn, Theme from Divertimento in B-flat major, ii

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16 Franz Josef Haydn, *Divertimento für 8-Stimmigen Bläserchor*, ed. Karl Geiringer (Leipzig:
Fritz Schuberth Jr., 1932), 2. In this edition, Geiringer altered the instrumentation—perhaps in
imitation of Brahms—to replace the uncommon serpent with the contrabassoon.
The Divertimento was scored for two oboes, three bassoons, two horns, and serpent, a scoring that Brahms follows closely in the first presentation of his theme. Brahms used contrabassoon instead of the serpent and added cellos and double basses to the first statement of the theme (Example 4.2).

EXAMPLE 4.2. Theme from Brahms, Haydn Variations, Opus 56a, mm. 1-10

\[\text{Chorale St. Antoni}\]

\[\text{Kleine Flöte} \]
\[\text{2 Flöt en} \]
\[\text{2 Oboen} \]
\[\text{2 Klarinetten in B} \]
\[\text{2 Fagotte} \]
\[\text{Kontrafagott} \]
\[\text{istief B} \]
\[\text{4 Hörner} \]
\[\text{in Es} \]
\[\text{2 Trompeten in B} \]
\[\text{Pauken in F, B} \]
\[\text{Triangel} \]
\[\text{1.Violine} \]
\[\text{2.Violine} \]
\[\text{Bratsche} \]
\[\text{Violoncell} \]
\[\text{Kontrabaß} \]

As seen in Example 4.2, Brahms followed his model closely, only altering the instrumentation slightly and supplementing the texture with the inclusion of strings. He even maintains the exact length of the Chorale, thirty measures.

Brahms concluded this theme and the subsequent variations with a Finale on a passacaglia, which is formed by the first five bars of the theme (Example 4.3).

EXAMPLE 4.3. *Basso ostinato* from Finale of Brahms, Haydn Variations, Opus 56a

Throughout his career, Brahms concluded more than one multi-movement work with a variation movement, some of which include some form of *basso ostinato*. Most famously, he concluded the Fourth Symphony with a passacaglia, just as he did in the Haydn Variations. Although the Haydn Variations is not a multi-movement work as such, it still carries the implications of concluding with a passacaglia, that is, an end-directed gravitas.

Brahms was following an already established precedent when he concluded the Haydn Variations and his Fourth Symphony with a passacaglia. Reaching back to the seventeenth century, composers had a propensity to conclude sets or works with a variation finale. Most often, these variation finales were based on a *basso ostinato*. Corelli’s Opus 5 (1700), already mentioned in the discussion of the Sextet No. 1, used “La folia” in the twelfth sonata—a *basso ostinato* variant that concludes the entire opus with twenty-two variations on the folia theme. Number 12 is one of the longest sonatas in the opus, and rather than dividing it into four or five movements, Corelli wrote a single set of variations. A variation finale is an emphatic and end-directed way to end a large-scale piece.

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18 These works include, in addition to the Haydn Variations, the Fourth Symphony, the Clarinet Quintet, and the Second Clarinet Sonata.
As we have seen, another well-known example of a basso ostinato finale is J. S. Bach’s Chaconne in D minor, BWV 1004. At the conclusion of the Partita, Bach used the longest single-movement of the time in a virtuosic chaconne that showcases the skill of the composer and the technique of the performer. Other examples of basso ostinato finales from the Baroque abound, but these two are perhaps the most significant to Brahms, as well as documented members of his library (see also the earlier discussion in Chapter Two). Beethoven had also taken advantage of the variation finale in his symphonic works (the Eroica), his chamber works, and his piano sonatas. Although he did not use basso ostinato-driven forms, Beethoven’s variation finales gave weight to Brahms’s through association. A discussion of Beethoven’s variation finales is another topic entirely, but their existence certainly affects Brahms’s choice of finales. The Haydn Variations are slightly unusual in that the passacaglia Finale follows a discrete set of variations. In his book on variation form, Robert Nelson asserts that the Haydn Variations are the first example of independent melodic variations that conclude with a passacaglia. It would have been more common to conclude the variation set with a fugue, as Brahms did in his Opus 24 Handel Variations for solo piano (1861).19 Evidently, Brahms was borrowing from several traditions when he composed Opus 56.

The Haydn Variations present an abundance of contrasts while preserving a tight-knit unity. Brahms ventures far away from the theme, and each variation presents a completely new character. This is achieved through changes in texture, tempo, time signature, and mode (Table 4.1).

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19 Nelson, The Technique of Variation, 93. Nelson uses the examples of J. S. Bach’s Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor (organ) and Beethoven’s Fifteen Variations with Fugue, Op. 35, for solo piano, as examples of variation sets that conclude with a fugue.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Meter</th>
<th>Tempo/expressive indication</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Notable Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme: mm. 1-29</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>Andante</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Double-reprise binary</td>
<td>Exact statement of the second movement of the Divertimento attributed to Haydn, with the addition of lower strings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 1: mm. 30-58</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>Poco più animato</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Double-reprise Binary</td>
<td>Woodwinds/brass play inverted pedal tone during var.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 2: mm. 59-87</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>Più vivace</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Double-reprise binary</td>
<td>Woodwinds/brass resume prominent thematic role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 3: mm. 88-145</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>Con moto</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Four related sections</td>
<td>Form takes more liberties and generates imitation between instruments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 4: mm. 146-205</td>
<td>3/8</td>
<td>Andante con moto</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Written-out double-reprise binary</td>
<td>Sections A and B are repeated using invertible counterpoint between the strings and woodwinds/brass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 5: mm. 206-263</td>
<td>6/8</td>
<td>Vivace</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Written-out double-reprise binary</td>
<td>As in Var. 4, the repeat of sections A and B rotates the thematic material between strings and woodwinds/brass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 6: mm. 264-292</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>Vivace</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Double-reprise binary</td>
<td>Fastest surface-level rhythm thus far.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 7: mm. 293-322</td>
<td>6/8</td>
<td>Grazioso</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Double-reprise binary</td>
<td>Surface-level rhythm slows and the texture thins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var. 8: mm. 322-360</td>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Presto non troppo</td>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Binary, repeats B section only</td>
<td>Fugal in the imitation of motives between instruments. Concludes with greatly syncopated section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finale: mm. 361-471</td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>Andante</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Passacaglia</td>
<td>Five-bar <em>basso ostinato</em> with sixteen variations, plus a coda.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1 attempts to demonstrate the diversity of tempo and character within the eight variations. An even closer analysis reveals many more innovative variation techniques that were devised with care and mastery. Each variation differs widely in character and texture, and Brahms’s approach appears to have been the perfect vehicle for practice in orchestration.

The theme of the Haydn Variations has, as previously mentioned, received considerable attention from scholars for its unusual phrase structure. The original Divertimento is a theme in rounded binary form. The A section is comprised of two five-measure phrases, while the B section is rather irregular, consisting of two four-measure phrases, and overlapping five- and seven-measure phrases. The phrase structure is preserved throughout each variation, with the exception of Variation IV, which expands the ending of the B section by one measure. The Finale capitalizes on the irregular structure by using the first five-measure phrase from the A section as the *basso ostinato*. The entire passacaglia is permeated with this phrase structure, which is somewhat unusual in length for a passacaglia, at least according to the eight-measure model described by H. C. Koch in Chapter Two. Likewise, it is an unusual phrase structure for the Classical period, and potentially contributed to the Divertimento’s appeal.

A closer look at the Finale demonstrates further evidence of tradition and progress in the Haydn Variations. After eight widely different variations of the theme, Brahms pulls out all of the stops, so to speak, with the inclusion of the passacaglia. The repetitive and unrelenting nature of the passacaglia could have easily stifled the conclusion to the Variations by concluding the structurally limiting variation form with an even more strict and exacting form. The Finale is far

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20 McCorkle’s monograph is the best source for a closer analysis of these variations.
from anticlimactic, however, and escalates to a dramatic conclusion. Brahms creates drama through the interplay between the basso ostinato and the surrounding textures.

Variation VIII sets the stage for the Finale’s entrance. Although the theme is hardly discernible in this minor mode variation, the phrase structure is still present. Brahms’s contrapuntal prowess shines in this variation, which begins with a theme in violas and cellos that is then imitated in inversion by the piccolo, clarinet, and bassoon (Example 4.4). The B section begins to liquidate the theme, which resolves to syncopated B-flats in the outermost voices of the orchestra, while the inner voices carry a syncopated moving line within the B-flat pedals (Example 4.5). The variation ends in a softly articulated (through staccato and pizzicato) B-flat major chord, before pausing for the beginning of the Finale.

EXAMPLE 4.4. Brahms, Haydn Variations, Opus 56a, Variation VIII, mm. 322-329

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EXAMPLE 4.5. Brahms, Haydn Variations, Opus 56a, Variation VIII, transition to Finale, mm. 354-364

23 Ibid., 26.
The Finale builds from the lowest voices to the highest voices, growing from the soft dynamic level given at the end of Variation VIII. The meter changes to alla breve—another nod to older practices—and the basses and cellos play the first statement of the basso ostinato, as the orchestra begins to build above it (Example 4.6). This basso ostinato is repeated sixteen times after its first iteration, and it takes that entire duration for Brahms to build gradually to the full orchestral texture. Each statement of the basso ostinato escalates the intensity of the Finale, even as the melodic variations above the basso ostinato create diversity and interest. Meanwhile, after its eighth occurrence, the basso ostinato begins to ascend through the orchestral texture.

Although it remains in the lowest sounding voice, the ninth iteration of the basso ostinato is without basses, played only by cello. The tenth and eleventh iterations take the basso ostinato

EXAMPLE 4.6. Brahms, Haydn Variations, Opus 56a, beginning of the Finale, mm. 361ff.24

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24 Ibid., 27.
to the violas then horns, as the cellos double the notes in subtle pizzicati with the violas. At its twelfth instance, the *basso ostinato*, becomes varied in the cellos, but returns in its original form in the oboes for the thirteenth iteration. The fourteenth and fifteenth iterations occur in the horns, upper woodwinds, and violins. Then follows the final instance of the *basso ostinato*, now in the horns and cellos alone, accompanied by the original “St. Antonii Chorale” as it appeared in at the beginning of the work. The Finale concludes with a codetta, beginning at measure 467, that dissolves the *basso ostinato*, while the original chorale theme returns in motivic fragments. The codetta is characterized by flourishes in the strings, woodwinds, and—Hanslick’s favorite—the triangle. Similar to Variation VIII, the texture thins and becomes static, emphasized in the Finale by a gradual decrease in surface-level rhythm. The Finale does end, however, with dramatic, repeated tonic triads both in tempo and at full volume and texture.

The singular effect of the passacaglia in this Finale is the rising *basso ostinato* through the ever-changing texture around it. The orchestral medium afforded Brahms these possibilities, and he utilized the movability of the passacaglia ostinato to its maximum potential. Through these devices, Brahms achieved a dramatic finale. Despite the inherent repetition of the passacaglia and the eight preceding variations, the material never loses its effect. The Haydn Variations represent a large-scale example of Brahms’s variation technique and his synthesis of old and new. Brahms incorporated traditional forms, styles, and literal references to the past in the Haydn Variations, but he in turn also influenced future composers with the coupling of independent variations and orchestral forces.
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

It is fitting that Brahms’s final opus, composed in 1896 and published in 1902 as Opus 122, is a set of eleven chorale preludes. The only compositions for organ assigned an opus number, they signify either a Bloomsian apophrades or an Eliot-inspired embrace. The tenth chorale prelude, “Herzlich tut mich verlagen,” places the chorale in the bass (pedal) voice, evoking the chorale variations discussed in the previous chapter. Opus 122 is startlingly reminiscent of J. S. Bach’s organ works—the fugue that begins the work could deceive any unknowing listener that they were listening to Bach. Is this not exemplary of apophrades, or the “return of the dead”? Bloom describes his final revisionary ratio, apophrades, as follows:

I take the word from the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to re-inhabit the houses in which they had lived. The later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor’s work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet’s flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now held open to the precursor, where once it was open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work.¹

Apophrades, then, is the poet’s (or the composer’s) vanquishing of their precursor, through a misreading so powerful that it overcomes and subdues the previous work. Only the strongest poets, according to Bloom, can achieve this final step.² I can hear Bach scholars crying in the distance—No! Brahms has not vanquished Bach, nor do Bach’s organ works imitate Brahms’s! However, in the case of Opus 122, and likewise Opus 18 and Opus 56a, there are moments—some fleeting, some not—when the listener pauses and wonders to whom are they listening, Brahms or...? These moments, though, are ultimately temporary. If Brahms had wanted

¹ Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, 15-16.
² Ibid., 141.
to defeat Bach through Opus 122, he would not have written chorale preludes for organ, but rather, a new, original vehicle for the chorale prelude, as he did with his Haydn Variations. Opus 122 seems less like a conquest and more like a wise and accomplished composer respectfully bowing his head towards a master to whom he owes so much. Brahms’s music was enriched through his awareness of his predecessors, but this awareness was not a crutch.

Although a study of other works by Brahms may offer contradiction, I believe that my analyses of the First Sextet and the Haydn Variations validate my initial hypothesis. Eliot’s concept of tradition and influence is compatible with Brahms’s intent for these two works, which exhibit a benign embrace of tradition rather than deliberate “misreading” or “misprision”—to use Bloom’s terminology. A final distinction between Bloom’s and Eliot’s concepts might be made: whereas Bloom’s response to influence necessitates a conquest and a defeat, Eliot’s response to influence advocates its timelessness. Brahms’s First Sextet and the Haydn Variations embody the timelessness of the styles and eras that they invoke.

Brahms smoothly integrates old and new elements into the First Sextet and the Haydn Variations. In both cases, he borrowed from older styles or examples, but never followed his historical models to the point of outright imitation. Instead, the First Sextet and the Haydn Variations synthesize genres and styles associated with *basso ostinato*. Moreover, in neither example does Brahms follow precise definitions of passacaglia, chaconne, or folia. The First Sextet and the Haydn Variations showcase not only these iconic genres, but also carry the stamp of composers whom Brahms studied and admired, such as Corelli and Bach. These pieces are not only progressive (based on Schoenberg’s criteria), but they are also preliminary modernist (after Burkholder’s definition). A study of the First Sextet and the Haydn Variations through the lens
of “Tradition and the Individual Talent” has convinced me that Brahms’s use of tradition and influence in these works coincides with the model set forth by Eliot.

This thesis began with Eliot’s words, and so it will conclude:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.
Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
Not that only, but the co-existence,
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,
And the end and the beginning were always there
Before the beginning and after the end.
And all is always no. Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
Always assail them. The Word in the desert
Is most attacked by voices of temptation,
The crying shadow in the funeral dance,
The loud lament of the disconsolate chimera.

The detail of the pattern is movement,
As in the figure of the ten stairs.
Desire itself is movement
Not in itself desirable;
Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Times, and undesiring
Except in the aspect of time
Caught in the form of limitation
Between un-being and being.
Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always—
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.
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