VARIATION TECHNIQUE IN THE
BAROQUE ORGAN CHORALE PARTITA

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

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1963

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INTRODUCTION

The organ music of the baroque period includes a wealth of literature based on the Lutheran chorale. These chorale-preludes incorporate a wide range of forms and variation techniques. This study is concerned with the particular form known as the chorale partita, which is a series of one-stanza settings. More specifically, a partita is a series of variations on a melody, usually unified in key and separated by firm cadences. The result is a lengthy composition of several independent sections.

A study of the development of this form of chorale composition involves the examination of a large body of keyboard music, including the dance suite, dance variations, variations on secular airs, and chorale variations. This paper is restricted to the chorale partita in Germany, but in order to trace this development adequately, contributions of influential composers from Italy, France, and the Netherlands are also mentioned.

The term "partita" appears first in early Italian baroque publications, where it is used to designate a series of variations on a melody. The seventeenth-century German
spelling of the term was "parthie" or "partie". In early baroque Germany, the term became synonymous with the word "suite," possibly because the French "partie" means movement, and a composition of several movements was known as a suite. It appears that the choice between the terms "partita" and "suite" in Germany may have depended upon whether the predominant influences on the composition in question were Italian or French. The term "partita" was not usually applied to a set of ecclesiastical variations before the middle of the seventeenth century, and then only certain sets of variations bore this caption.

There seem to be few or no consistent differences between the compositions labeled "partita" and other sets of variations; thus, many sets of variations not specifically labeled "partita" are included in this study.

Several influences combined in the development of the chorale partita. Arnold Schering believes that organ chorale variations originated in the early Lutheran service, with the introduction of the alternatim practice, in which the congregation and organist performed stanzas of the chorale in alternation.¹ This explanation suggests mainly

the one-stanza chorale-prelude. The chorale partita, however, was primarily receptive to the secular influences of the dance suite, which will be considered in chapter one, and secular variation techniques, dealt with in chapter two. Chapter three is devoted to techniques of melodic and structural expansion, resulting in large compositions of greater originality.
I. INFLUENCE OF THE DANCE SUITE

Sacred and secular music were not clearly differentiated in the baroque period. It was not unusual to find dance rhythms in the church service or secular tunes applied to sacred texts. The chorale variation was a somewhat hybrid type of variation. It combined characteristics of both secular and sacred influences, emerging in the form of a suite.

The suite of independent movements, unified in key and origin, can safely be called a baroque innovation. Bukofzer discusses at length the characteristic multi-sectional structure of early baroque music. These sections within a single piece eventually became differentiated into movements.\(^2\) The dance suites, variation suites (on secular airs and dance tunes), and chorale partitas had this type of formal structure.

As trends of composition change, it is not unusual to find remnants of the old style and a certain reluctance

to yield to the pressures of progress. This is exemplified in the variations on the allemande tune *Sei es sein*³ by Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654). Of the ten variations, only numbers three, four, and nine have a decisive cadence bringing the variation to a close; the others, melting from one to the next, result in a composition which is multi-sectional rather than multi-movement in effect. We find the same pattern in many of the works of Jan Sweelinck (1562-1621), such as the six variations on the *Passamezzo*.⁴ These can hardly be termed suites in the sense of being several distinct movements. They are single compositions, containing sections which are stylistically unified within but are not separated by decisive cadences.

The formulation of the classic dance suite - allemande, courante, sarabande, and gigue - was a French innovation. This form served as the basis for much of the keyboard literature throughout the baroque period. It influenced compositions on the chorale in two ways: first, through the use of specific dance rhythms in chorale variations and,


secondly, through its use of variation. Dance variations appeared in expanded suites where doubles followed certain movements, and as sets of variations composed on a dance tune. The latter, according to Nelson, "although appearing less often than either the song theme or the aria, served as the basis for variations during the entire two hundred and fifty years of the baroque period."

To trace the influence of the dance suite on the partita, we shall consider one of the earliest composers of idiomatic keyboard music, the Italian Giacomo Frescobaldi (1583-1643). He was the last and most important of a school of seventeenth century Italian composers who wrote variation suites. His suite on the air *La Frescobalda* is one of the earliest works which assumed both the characteristics of the dance suite and variation form. In this composition, the tune is stated in simple chordal style with four variations. Each variation assumes the characteristic rhythmic pattern and texture of a dance. Following

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the initial melodic statement, the first variation in 6/4 meter treats the melody in a fluid but stately style suggestive of the French courante. Though still stated in straight-forward quarter notes, the melody undergoes slight rhythmic variation and simple figuration, with complementary, imitative movement in the bass voice. The third movement, labeled *Gagliarda-Allegro deciso* (Ex. 1), has the stately firmness of this dance which later gave way to the sarabande. This variation is typical of the gagliarde style - chiefly chordal with dotted rhythms, triple meter, and two eight-measure, repeated sections. The fourth movement, *Andante* (Ex. 2), could qualify as a double, with its continuously figured eighth-note patterns, treating the melody line in a fashion which renders it obscure. The second section of this double becomes more gay with the introduction of a sprightly rhythmic motive derived from the second section of the *Gagliarda*. The final variation is a sprightly *Corrente*, also homophonic, but of lighter texture than the *Gagliarda*. The subjection of a melody in 4/4 meter to the restrictions of the 3/2 gagliarde and 3/4 courante necessarily does some violence to the original flow and style of the air; however, this became an increasingly popular device in both sacred and secular variations.
Ex. 1. Frescobaldi: La Frescobalda

III. Parte: Gagliarda - Allegro deciso

Ex. 2. Frescobaldi: La Frescobalda

IV. Andante [Double]

Second Section

Second Section
The overall effect of this composition is largely that of a dance suite, with only conservative variation techniques used; thus, the theme and variations form is overshadowed by the dance suite form.

The incorporation of dance rhythms in chorale variations can be found as early as Sweelinck. In the sixth variation of Sweelinck's Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott (Ex. 3), the first phrase has the galloping effect of a gigue with the use of triplet figuration; however, this pattern is discontinued in subsequent phrases, not to reoccur until in the final drive to the cadence in shorter note values.

Ex. 3. Sweelinck: Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott

In this early period, dance rhythms are present more frequently in variations on secular tunes than in sacred variations. Scheidt, who expanded the variation methods of his teacher, Sweelinck, was more consistent in his treatment of the chorale, as well as more progressive in
his techniques of variation. One can discern dance rhythm influences, other than allemande rhythms, in his variations on the allemande tune Also gehts, also stehts. In the seventh and final variation (Ex. 4), there is a departure from the somewhat tiresome pattern of sixteenth notes in 4/4 meter which prevail in the first six variations; the seventh is in 6/4 meter, with the pattern half-quarter-half-quarter providing the rollicking effect of the gigue. Interestingly, he transfers the concluding three-measure cadence back to a staid 4/4 meter, establishing a somber conclusion. This practice of departing from the meter pattern in the final variation is not uncommon in Scheidt's works.

Ex. 4. Scheidt: Also gehts, also stehts

7. Variatio

Jacob Froberger (1616-1667), a pupil of Frescobaldi, adapted the dance suite to the keyboard in Germany, following a sojourn in France. In his adaptation of the French suite, he incorporated both German solidity and Italian
florid style, emerging with the internationally-flavored clavier suites. Hugo Riemann, in a discussion of the German suite, also attests to its international character. He points out that to understand its development fully, it is important to recognize that, during the entire era of its flowering, the German suite was very receptive to foreign elements, and in an investigation of its roots, one must look outside Germany.9

Froberger, following in his master's footsteps, also composed a clavier suite combining the dance suite and variation techniques, based on the secular air Auf die Mayerin.10 The movements or "partite" are labeled prima, secunda, terza, quarta, quinto and sexta, concluding with a courante and double and a sarabande. The first two movements appear to be patterned after an allemande and double, though they are not so labeled. The third section, with its 12/8 meter and perpetual eighth-note pattern, is similar to a gigue, particularly the rollicking type of gigue which can be found in Froberger's other clavier suites.

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The courante, with its slow dotted rhythms, is nearly identical in style to the courantes in many of his other suites. The double retains the stately style of that dance, with simple but continuous figuration from one voice to another. The sarabande is very staid - almost martial - with very little embellishment in the way of figuration or passing tones. The movements of this suite are considerably less elaborate and involved in their development than are the movements of Froberger's dance suites. The dance suites lack the primness and restraint which characterize Auf die Mayörin.

The partita Auf meinen lieben Gott (Ex. 5) by Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707) is one of the few examples of literal adaptation of the dance suite form to the chorale. Since the division of secular and sacred music was not an issue in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the chorale melody was frequently treated in the same manner as a dance or air. In fact, Hutchins states that "Mattheson[a progressive seventeenth century writer and musician] instructs his readers how a chorale melody may be transformed to fit typical dance rhythms."11 It is notable

that Buxtehude chose one of the best-known and most frequently arranged chorales for this purpose. He manages to preserve quite intact the character of the cantus firmus, even throughout the confining triple meter of the courante and sarabande movements. The statement of the chorale, followed by a double, is presented in a decorated, thoroughly harmonic manner, giving it the carefree versatility of many allemande movements. The double follows the stereotyped pattern of Froberger's dance doubles, as can be seen in a comparison of this pair with the allemande and double of Froberger's Suite XXIII in E minor (Ex. 6). The courante, sarabande, and gigue adhere closely to the traditional rhythmic patterns of these dances.

Ex. 5. Buxtehude: Auf meinen lieben Gott
Ex. 5. (continued)

Courante

Sarabande

Gigue

Ex. 6. Froberger: Suite XXIII

Allemande
Composers of chorale variations in the late baroque era were occupied with the artistic expansion of the chorale melody; however, this development did not exclude the use of dance forms. Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706), though not chiefly a contributor to partita literature, produced an abundance of variation and dance suites for the clavier which influenced subsequent variation writing. His compositions on the chorale are not comprised of sets of variations, with the exception of Treuer Gott, ich muss dir klagen, a partita of four variations.\textsuperscript{12} This partita makes no use of dance rhythms, but is very conservative in variation treatment, harking back almost exclusively to the pedantic cantus firmus style of Scheidt.

On the other hand, eight of Pachelbel's ten sets of variations on secular airs contain movements which incorporate the gigue rhythm in various forms and patterns. Clearly, in contrast, his interest in chorale variations revolved around the development of an artistic fugal style of variation.

\textsuperscript{12}The two chorales, Allein zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ and Meine Seele erhebt den Herrn, which contain second sections labeled \textit{alio modo} are not considered partitas by the writer, because only one variation is present. The same applied to the two settings of Vom Himmel Hoch. See Denkmäler Deutscher Tonkunst ed. Adolf Sandberger, Zweite Folge: Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Bayern, IV, Vol. 6-7: Orgelkompositionen von Johann Pachelbel (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1903), pp. 69-70, 116, 128-130.
Pachelbel's dance suites for clavier incorporate interesting hybrid techniques - again a mixture of dances and variations. Although one particular melodic theme is not carried through an entire suite, there appears to be some degree of thematic unity between dances - particularly the allemand and courant in several suites (Ex. 7).

Ex. 7. Pachelbel: 34. Suite, G dur

[Sheet music image]

Pachelbel: 40. Suite, Es dur

[Sheet music image]
Pachelbel's later keyboard suites become more elaborately figured and highly ornamented, initiating a new brightness into the suite form. Although the relevance of Pachelbel's chorale works is limited as far as this study is concerned, in order to fix his role in mind, Spitta's statement is enlightening:

In the field of chorale arrangements Pachelbel deserves the credit of having brought selection, order, and dignity to bear on the abundant, but uncultured offshoots of organ music in Central Germany, and of having diverted the tide of southern beauty to flood the channels of German artistic feeling. 13

The numerous partitas of Georg Böhm (1661–1733), including an aria, *Jesu, du bist allzu schön*, have traces of dance rhythms and at times incorporate them thoroughly in the sacred variation form. His style also crosses

national boundaries, as Bukofzer observes.

Both the French and German aspects of the suite are clearly represented by Böhm, a composer noteworthy equally for his thorough command of the French agréments and of the resources of tonal harmony.¹⁴

Of the fourteen variations on the above-mentioned aria, two bear striking resemblance to movements from his dance suites. Partita nine (Ex. 8) in 6/8 meter possesses the rather thin texture, dotted rhythms and perpetual movement of the gigue from Suite No. 1 in c moll (Ex. 8).

Ex. 8. Böhm: Arie: Jesu du bist allzu schön

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¹⁴Bukofzer, 264.
Partita twelve (Ex. 9) represents a marked departure from the pattern of previous variations with its subdued 3/4 meter, similar to the sarabande from Suite No. 6 in Eb major (Ex. 9).

Ex. 9. Böhm: Arie: Jesu du bist allzu schöne

In the chorale partitas, the gigue rhythm seemingly is most popular as a change from the regular 4/4 meter. We find these in Versus three of Auf meinen lieben Gott, the last section of Versus two in Christe, der du bist Tag und Licht, and in Partita nine of Freu dich sehr O meine Seele.
It is easily imagined that every $3/2$ variation indicates courante or sarabande influence, which may not always be true; however, it seems certain that this is the case in the stately chordal style of Partite six and eight of *Ach wie nößtig, ach wie flüchtig* (Ex. 10). An Ex. 10. Böhm: *Ach wie nößtig, ach wie flüchtig*

interesting $3/2$ arrangement, seemingly not derived from a dance, is the fugal trio in *Versus* four of Böhm's *Auff meiner lieben Gott*. This is an unmistakable departure from the figural variation technique. A variation pattern which is strikingly characteristic of the dance suite is
the sixteenth note extension of the cantus firmus in a solid harmonic setting; this usually follows a more solemn statement of the theme in the manner of a double following the allemande. Böhm uses this technique in Partite two and four of Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten (Ex. 11). Ex. 11. Böhm: Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten

Moving into the culmination of the baroque era, it is evident that in most of the chorale variations the influence of the classic dance suite rhythms has dwindled
to a mere trace. For example, in the many chorale works of Johann Gottfried Walther (1684-1748), there are only isolated examples of dance rhythms, and these are limited mostly to the gigue. Gigue rhythms are present in variations seven and eight of *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend*, the last section of variation five of *Ach Gott und Herr* in which a 6/8 gigue fugue expands and enhances this form, verses two and four of *Liebster Jesu* with the theme introduced in a rollicking triplet pattern, and verses five and six of *Mach's mit mir, Gott, nach deiner Güte*, a little gigue fuggetta.  

The outstanding developments in the chorales of Walther are in the area of the ostinato themes and motivic expansion; these reached a high degree of artistic use in the chorale variations. Although there are indications that some of the ostinato basses were derived from dance tunes, most of them appear to be original melodic creations.

In the three partitas of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), the gigue again seems to be the most popular dance rhythm. Partita eight of *Christ der du bist der helle Tag*, with its 12/8 rhythm employs perpetual sixteenth notes

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in the fourth, fifth, and octave skips typical of his style; the melody is generally intertwined in longer note values. A 12/8 gigue rhythm again appears in variation six of *Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig*. This variation, however, lacks the freedom and abandon of earlier gigue movements because of the predominance of figural extensions and rhythmic motives. This type of elaborate writing hampers the usual freedom of gigue motion. It is true that the harpsichord dance suites in this period had become more elaborate also, so it follows that the chorale compositions would assimilate the contemporary trends. Partita seven of *O Gott du frommer Gott* (Ex. 12) evidently is patterned after the early courante with its running eighth figures in 3/4 meter and two short repeated sections.

Ex. 12. J. S. Bach: *O Gott du frommer Gott*
Partite three and five in the same set have the characteristics of dance doubles with the web-like extension of the melody and the after-beat accompaniment patterns (Ex. 13).

Ex. 13. J. S. Bach: O Gott du frommer Gott
II. APPLICATION OF
SECULAR VARIATION TECHNIQUES

We have considered the specific influences of the
dance suite upon the development of the chorale partita
and found that, to a great extent, the dance forms were
incorporated into sacred compositions. Parallel to this
trend and similar in many respects was the interpenetration
of the secular and sacred techniques of variation.
The "chorale partita or variations, were developed out of
the secular variation technique first used, probably, by
the English virginal school. The chorale melody replaces
the air...as a basis of variation..."1

Variation suites on secular airs were exceedingly
popular during the last half of the sixteenth century and
well into the seventeenth. Variations on chorale melodies
flourished a little later, mainly in central and north
Germany.2 The secular variation techniques follow a stylized
pattern throughout the early and middle baroque period.

1Hutchins, 16.
2Nelson, 55.
They can be roughly categorized under two headings: the cantus firmus technique and the figured melodic style within a solid harmonic frame. In the cantus firmus technique, the melody is preserved almost literally throughout the set of variations, and may be tossed around from voice to voice in a variety of positions, yet always maintaining its initial rhythm and style. The figured melodic style represents the first attempts to improve upon the literal chorale statements, which tend to become tiring. This style takes two rather distinct forms. In the first, the melody is usually preserved intact in the soprano voice, surrounded with elaborate figuration, which may be derived from the chorale tune. The second form takes greater freedom with the melody, disguising and even obscuring it in the preoccupation with figurations and elaborate accompaniment motives.

The application of these devices to the chorale melody was conservative in many cases. The secular variations show greater diversity in the use of imaginative motives and rhythms; there are more frequent departures from the established pattern, and the overall mood is definitely brighter than that of the sacred variations.

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3 Ibid., 10.
Sweelinck is the earliest master from whom we have a large body of variation literature based on secular airs and chorale tunes. However, his pupil, Samuel Scheidt, has been credited with being the father of ecclesiastical variations because of his distinct style and establishment of the cantus firmus technique as a type.\textsuperscript{4}

In the secular realm, it is interesting to note that the pattern of variations becomes increasingly ornate and figured with each variation - this being done mainly by diminishing note values. There are a few exceptions where a number of virtuoso-style variations are interrupted by slow, solemn movements. This trend of increasing complexity is less noticeable in the sacred variations, a fact contributing to their generally more solemn tone. Frequently in both types of variations, the note values diminish from phrase to phrase within a particular variation.

Although the structures of secular and sacred variations have many things in common, frequent differences in brightness of mood can be attributed to the melodies themselves as well as to the specific techniques used. The chorale melody is generally more staid and square than the tuneful, free movement of the secular airs, and thus suggests less playful figuration. Spitta seems to feel that

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., 56.
the staid chorale melody was not inhibitive in the hands of Böhm: "...his fancy was inexhaustible in novel transformations and new clothing of the melody. He delighted in such labors, but it is true that the chorale sank to the level of any ordinary secular air." 5

In the early years of chorale variation, the similarities between the sacred and secular compositions are more evident than in the works of Böhm, Walther and Bach. Sweelinck's chorale variations show many direct borrowings of secular techniques. "He made the essentially secular variation technique of the virginalists subservient to a liturgical purpose." 6 In his variations on Soll es sein, the tune is stated almost literally in all eight variations and is tossed around from voice to voice. We find an almost identical pattern in his sacred variations on Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr. In all four variations, the melody is preserved intact amidst the increasingly complex figuration patterns. The treatment of the figuration surrounding the cantus firmus also is strikingly similar in chorale and secular variations. This is evident in a comparison of variation four of Soll es sein with

5Spitta, 208, 209.
6Bukofzer, 75.
variation three of *Herrlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr* (Ex. 1); both consist of a *bicinium* with the melody in the soprano and the other voice in eighth- or sixteenth-note figuration.

Ex. 1. Sweelinck: *Soll es sein*

\[ \text{Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr} \]

This use of the *bicinium* is common in variations throughout the baroque period (Ex. 2).
Ex. 2. Scheidt: Wir glauben all an einen Gott

Buxtehude: Vater Unser im Himmelreich

Bohm: Herr Jesu Christ, dicht zu uns wend

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Ex. 2 (continued)

Walther: *Herr Jesus Christ, dich zu uns wend*

**Variatio 7**

The sixteenth-note pattern frequently changes voices. In the fifth variation of Sweelinck's *Soll es sein* and the second variation of *Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr* (Ex. 3), the melody is in the bass voice with the sixteenth-note passagework in the remaining voices.

Ex. 3. Sweelinck: *Soll es sein*
A distinguishing factor between Sweelinck's secular and sacred variations is the presence of flowery interludes between phrases of the cantus firmus.

The differentiation of the two idioms becomes even less marked in the works of Scheidt. In the \textit{Tabulatura Nova} the secular and sacred pieces are freely mixed. His "...plan of treating the successive phrases of the plain song or chorale as cantus firmus fragments, with the remaining voices providing an intricately imitative contrapuntal setting..."\textsuperscript{8} is consistently followed throughout all of his variation compositions. The deviations from this cantus firmus technique are slight as in \textit{Warum betrübst du dich mein Herz} where the chorale melody is literal up to the

\textsuperscript{8}Nelson, 56.
final variation in which it is highly figured. Note the similarity in treatment of the ninth variation of the *Niederländisch Liedchen - Weh, Windchen, Weh* and the sixth verse of *Vater unser im Himmelreich* (Ex. 4). In both, the melody is in the bass, with two voices above moving in parallel thirds and sixths.

Ex. 4. Scheidt: *Weh, Windchen, Weh*

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It is interesting to compare other variations which employ the same three-voice pattern. The following
examples reflect historical influence from one composer to another as well as the assimilation of secular patterns into chorale compositions. Pachelbel, in his sixth variation of *Ach was soll ich Sünder machen*, employs a technique similar to Sweelinck's fifth variation of *Soll es sein* (Ex. 5). Böhm and Walther employ more.

Ex. 5. Pachelbel: *Ach was soll ich Sünder machen*

![Variation 6](image)

Sweelinck: *Soll es sein*

![Variation 20](image)

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9 A chorale from his *Musikalisches Sterbensgedancken*, a collection of chorale variations which, according to Max Seiffert, *DDT, 1st series, XXVI-XXVII, foreward, p. xx* are "klaviermässige Variationen über Chorallieder fürs Haus" (for domestic use). Three chorales from this set are included in the *DDT, 2nd series (DTB) II.*
free accompaniment figures. It is apparent that Walther adapted some Böhm techniques as is seen in a comparison of his third variation on *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten* with Böhm's third variation on *Christ, der du bist Tag und Licht* (Ex. 6). The sixteenth-note figure is similar, and, interestingly enough, Walther includes the agréments and Böhm does not.

Ex. 6. Walther: *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*

![Musical notation for Walther's version of "Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten"]

Böhm: *Christ, der du bist Tag und Licht*

![Musical notation for Böhm's version of "Christ, der du bist Tag und Licht"]
The secular variations are considerably shorter than the chorale variations. One reason is that the chorale is stated in longer note values — either whole or half notes, while the secular tunes are stated in shorter note values. This is another subtle evidence of a tendency on the part of composers to differentiate the two idioms, despite the frequent interchange of variation techniques. Further, in early chorale variations, there are only isolated examples of a "swinging" six-beat rhythm which characterizes many secular variations. It is interesting to note the deviations from the conscientious attempts of composers to maintain the solemnity of the chorale. As though tiring of the 4/4 feeling, certain phrases within a variation take the form of rollicking triplet patterns for several measures before returning to the regular quadruple rhythm (Ex. 7). Note also the sequence of diminishing note values.

Although Scheidt's partitas follow a rather monotonous pattern of variation, (when placed beside Böhm, for example), he had a novel interest in unusual effects and incorporated them indiscriminately in his sacred and secular variations. The frequent use of imitatio violistica is an attempt to borrow from the viol style. This device is usually found in a two or three voice texture, in which
one voice is the literal cantus firmus and the *imitatio violistica* is the figured accompaniment as in the fifth verse of *Vater Unser im Himmelreich* (Ex. 8).

Ex. 8. Scheidt: *Vater Unser im Himmelreich*
The second category of variation techniques adapted to the chorale partita - the figured melodic line - is found extensively in the works of Sweelinck. These quasi-contrapuntal melodic lines often give the effect of two melodies in one voice. Whereas in the cantus firmus technique of Scheidt, the accompaniment often took the form of perpetual sixteenth notes against the unfigured melody, here the melody is present in sixteenth-note passage-work with a simple unfigured chordal accompaniment. This procedure can be traced through the baroque period (Ex. 9).

Ex. 9. Sweelinck: Unter der Linden grüne

\[\text{Melody}\]

\[\text{3rd Variation}\]

\[\text{Chordal Accompaniment}\]
Ex. 9 (continued)

Sweelinck: Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott

Chorale (Second Phrase)

G. Variatic

Scheidt: Niederländisch Liedchen - Weh, Windchen, Weh

Excerpt of Melody

2. Variatio

Vater Unser im Himmlischen

Chorale
Ex. 9 (continued)

Pachelbel: Aria (No. 7 in D major)

The use of this technique became increasingly decorated. The melody was varied in patterns of parallel thirds and sixths rather than a single line. In addition, the chorale tune became broken up into fragments and motives
which were employed as extensions and sequences and which became characteristic rhythmic patterns within a variation. This melodic expansion is employed conservatively in variation five of Sweelinck's *Est-ce Mars* and the third variation of *Vater Unser im Himmelreich* (Ex. 10)

**Ex. 10. Sweelinck: *Est-ce Mars***

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**Vater Unser im Himmelreich**

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The melodic variation was not limited to formalized rhythmic patterns. Scheidt utilizes a more flourishing, virtuoso rhythmic variation of the secular and sacred tunes in the tenth variation of Est-ce Mars and the eighth verse of Vater Unser (Ex. 11).

Ex. 11. Scheidt: Est-ce Mars

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Vater Unser

Chorale (Fourth Phrase)
Although variation techniques became increasingly complex with Böhm, Walther, and Bach, we still note a frequent harking back to the simpler variation style of Scheidt. In the third partita of Böhm's *Freu dich sehr o meine Seele* (Ex. 12), the familiar eighth-sixteenth pattern forms the melodic variation, with the addition of the French *agrement*. In verse three of Walther’s

**Ex. 12. Böhm: Freu dich sehr o meine Seele**

variations on *Liebster Jesu*, the perpetual sixteenth-note passagework, incorporating the chorale melody, follows the pattern of Scheidt and Sweelinck, with the addition of the ornaments and the "walking" eighth-note accompaniment so characteristic of Bach.

Pachelbel's variations on secular airs are an interesting combination of the *cantus firmus* technique and the figured melodic technique. They are extremely conservative
in their variation patterns and resemble the techniques which characterize Sweelinck and Scheidt. He differs in the consistent placement of the cantus firmus in the soprano voice, rather than moving it from voice to voice as in Sweelinck and Scheidt. A wide variety of techniques characterize this soprano line, particularly in the *Musikalisches Sterbensgedanken*. His adaptations of secular techniques are quite literal in this collection, though somewhat more conservative in tone. The typical sixteenth note passages incorporating the cantus firmus with straight chordal accompaniment — and the opposite pattern — the literal cantus firmus with sixteenth note accompaniment are frequent devices.

The figured melodic technique in a solid harmonic setting takes varied forms, resulting in a web-like extension effect as in variation two of the *Aria* in a minor and variation one of *Ach was soll ich Sünder machen* (Ex. 13).

Ex. 13. Pachelbel: *Aria*
Ex. 13. (continued)

Pachelbel: *Ach was soll ich Sünden machen*

More frequently, Pachelbel employs a staid pattern of perpetual sixteenth or thirty-second notes, with little or no deviation from the rhythmic pattern.
III. ARTISTIC EXPANSION
OF THE
CHORALE VARIATION

In tracing the development of the organ chorale partita, the two main outside influences have been considered: the dance suite and the secular variation.

In the hundred years of its growth (roughly 1650-1750), the partita form underwent evolutionary changes. The styles of Sweelinck and Scheidt gave way to one of greater freedom.

Alongside of variations which are intricately fashioned and contrapuntal, after the manner of Scheidt, stand those build upon a more homophonic plan, such as Pachelbel's *Ach was soll ich täun.* and Walther's *Jesu Meine Freude*; alongside of variations which preserve intact the structure of the theme (like the Pachelbel and Walther pieces just mentioned) stand those which incorporate intrinsic expansion of the chorale melody itself, such as J. S. Bach's *O Gott, du frommer Gott* and Pöhm's *Christe, der du bist Tag und Licht.*

Bold harmonic progressions were coupled with ingenious and imaginative variation techniques. The melody became

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1Bukofzer, 56.
a tool of experimentation; it was broken into fragments, inverted, amplified, diminished and rhythmically re-worked. It often became obscured in the flurry of counter-melodies, motivic material and intricately-developed accompaniments. This disregard for the melodic structure was often complemented by ostinato bass patterns which were treated quite freely through the unfolding of the chorale.

During this period, chorale writing began to lose its objectivity, a fact which naturally resulted from the bold, new treatment of the variation form. Another possible reason for less objectivity was the attempt on the part of the composer to interpret musically the spirit of the text. Hutchins notes that:

By treating the melody in arabesques, the composer created a substantially new melody which may express the subjective content of the words better than the chorale melody itself. Chorale variations, or partitas, in this generation lost the rather pedantic strictness which characterized them in the time of Scheidt and even Sweelinck, when they were still strictly liturgical in function.2

Although music historians frequently make general statements about the musical interpretation of the chorale text, it is difficult to find a partita in which the variations consistently correspond to the spirit of the stanzas.

2Hutchins, 16.
Schweitzer points out that certain movements of Bach's partita on *O Gott du frommer Gott* show distinct patterns of "tone-painting." This appears to have some validity; however, similar examples of this practice are not evident in earlier partitas. One may conclude that the greater bulk of chorales which contain "tone-painting" are found in the individual chorale-preludes, rather than the partitas.

Nelson quotes Vincent d'Indy as describing the artistic expansion of the chorale melody with the term, *l'amplification thématique*. Spitta further describes this technique (crediting Böhm with its first use):

...each separate line...is thematically exhausted by the disjuncteur of its principle melodic ideas, and by their repetition, dissection, modification, and various recombination...Nor was he [Georg Böhm] bound as in variations strictly speaking, by the harmonic and rhythmic conditions of the theme, but could create new proportions and phrases, building up a composition all his own...

This chorale treatment was not limited to Böhm, as we shall note.

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4Nelson, 62.

5Spitta, 212.
What were some of the devices common in the treatment of the cantus firmus? A favorite technique was the breaking up of the melody into phrases, separated by decorative interludes; in addition, short motives derived from a phrase of the cantus firmus were developed in sequential patterns. Böhm employs a sequential pattern as the main feature of Versus one in Auf meinen lieben Gott (Ex. 1). In the fifth variation of Gelobet seist du, Ex. 1. Böhm: Auf meinen lieben Gott

Herr Jesu Christ, (Ex. 2) the melody is nearly obscured by the eighth- and sixteenth-note sequential figuration.
Walther employs a rhythmic pattern, containing a figure remotely related to the melody, in his sixth variation of Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend (Ex. 3). It is a quasi-ostinato pattern treated sequentially, and serves as introduction, interlude and accompaniment for the nearly literal statement of the cantus firmus. Clearly, here, the chief segment of interest is the ostinato accompaniment rather than the statement of the chorale.

In many cases the composer altered the melody rhythmically and incorporated it into a larger new theme of his own creation. No great effort was made to include every pitch of the chorale in the new melodic creation. A comparison of Pachelbel and Böhm in relation to this technique reveals the variety of possibilities which were
Ex. 3. Walther: *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend*

explored (Ex. 4). Pachelbel uses perpetual activity in long phrases with the melody incorporated in the linear fabric. Böhm, on the other hand, constructs a rather disjointed pattern in a solid harmonic frame, with the melody expanded in fragments.

Ex. 4. Pachelbel: *Werde mutter mein Gemüthe*
The altered chorale melodies of Walther and Bach are similar in many ways to those of Böhm, and are supported by a strong harmonic structure. The individual phrases of the Walther chorale variations are usually treated in their entirety, rather than in fragments, as in the first variation of Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend (Ex. 5) and are varied primarily through adornment and embellishment after the manner of Böhm. This same procedure, with the embellishments written out, is found in Partita three of Bach’s Christ der du bist der helle Tag (Ex. 6).
An unusual chromatic expansion of all voices is found in Partita seven of Bach's O Gott du frommer Gott (Ex. 7).
Ex. 7. J. S. Bach: O Gott du frommer Gott

In the Bach partitas, the melody is often kept intact and is readily discernible in spite of the complex figuration. D'Indy says of the partitas:

Many of these variations belong to the purely contrapuntal and decorative category; the theme remains virtually unchanged and is revealed at the same time as the counterpoints which surround it. 6

He goes on to explain that this plan is dependent upon a contrapuntal style:

In this polyphonic state of the variation, the theme subsists intrinsically; it does not change; the variation revolves around it, draws inspiration from it, comments on it and imitates it, without affecting or penetrating it; the variation becomes purely extrinsic. 7

6 Nelson, 14.
7 Ibid., 15.
We have examined variations in which the cantus firmus is intact and those in which it is expanded; it is interesting to note a combination of these two in Walther's seventh verse of *Wie soll ich dich empfangen* (Ex. 8) in which the cantus firmus is stated literally at intervals in the bass voice, while the accompaniment consists of two highly figured lines incorporating the chorale in imitative interplay above.

Ex. 8. Walther: *Wie soll ich dich empfangen*

![Musical notation]

The second method of artistic variation to consider - the ostinato pattern - forms the accompaniment structure in many partitas. The function of the ostinato rhythm, usually located in the bass voice, varies with the composer. Böhm apparently considered an ostinato pattern the element of primary interest, using it in a duet with a simply adorned statement of the melody, preserved quite intact (Ex. 9).
These patterns must all be classed as quasi-ostinato patterns because of their very free treatment. The first statement of the ostinato is frequently not reproduced literally more than once or twice throughout the variation. The rhythmic style and melodic contour are followed closely, however, which justifies the term ostinato.

Walther, in Verse three of Schmücke dich (Ex. 10), and Bach, in Partita two of O Gott du frommer Gott (Ex. 11), treat the ostinato variation in similar fashion, with the embellished chorale in figural extension. Both voices are treated in fragments and extended sequentially; the result is a lengthy composition. Clearly, the chorale tune is relegated to an inferior position, and the variation takes the form of bi-thematic development.
Ex. 10. Walther: Schmücke dich

Ex. 11. Bach: O Gott du frommer Gott
A third method of chorale expansion was the use of fugal writing. We note this style particularly in the chorale works of Pachelbel. Spitta describes his use of fugue as follows:

Each line is introduced by a short passage of imitation deriving its material from the first notes of the line itself, and so preparing us for it; ... The contrapuntal figures themselves, however, are not derived from this [the melody] but are of independent origin.

Although Pachelbel wrote a prolific number of chorale-preludes, he wrote very few variations on chorale melodies; his chorale-preludes are usually single movements. Although the single setting of the chorale is outside the scope of this study, Pachelbel's influence here must be considered. Strangely, he did not use imitation in his secular variations on airs, nor in the *Musikalisches Sterbensgedanken*. However, it is his trademark in the chorale-preludes. A typical fugal exposition of the chorale is found in the one-stanza setting of *Christ lag in Todesbanden* (Ex. 12).

Böhm incorporates two distinct styles of fugal development, the first of which is very similar to Pachelbel's style.

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8Spitta, 113.
Ex. 12. Pachelbel: Christ lag in Todesbanden

Verse two of Böhm's Auf meinen lieben Gott (Ex. 13) is a well-written, extensively developed fugal composition complete with sequential episodes.

Ex. 13. Böhm: Auf meinen lieben Gott
The other type is found in verse six of *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend* (Ex. 14). It is a relatively simple fugue, clear-cut in form and slightly ornamented. The melody is preserved intact except for slight rhythmic alteration.

Ex. 14. Böhm: *Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend*

The use of fugal devices in Walther's partitas are numerous and varied. A few specific types stand out. Verse three of *Ach Gott und Herr* (Ex. 15) has a three-voiced texture in which two voices move in fugal counterpoint derived from the theme, while the cantus firmus
rings clearly in literal statements at irregular intervals.

Ex. 15. Walther: *Ach Gott und Herr*

In verse two of *Durch Adams Fall*, a motive derived from the first phrase of the chorale, developed into a fughetta, introduces the statement of the first phrase; each successive phrase is preceded by a similar fughetta (Ex. 16).

Ex. 16. Walther: *Durch Adams Fall*
In verse five of *Ach Gott und Herr* (Ex. 17), the fugal development is carried through more extensively, in the manner of Böhm, rather than as interludes and fughettas.

Ex. 17. Walther: *Ach Gott und Herr*
SUMMARY

We have examined the numerous variation techniques which characterized the chorale partita throughout the baroque period. Early in its development, the dance suite and variation suite exerted decisive influence on its formal structure and rhythmic patterns. These influences extended throughout the history of partita compositions.

The secular variations on melodies and airs often served as models for the variation techniques applied to chorales. The two main types - the cantus firmus technique and the melodico-harmonic technique, formed the great bulk of chorale partitas patterned after variations on secular tunes.

With the artistic expansion of the chorale variation came free treatment of the melody and ingenious development of counter-melodies. These devices took the forms of amplification of the theme through imitation and sequence, ostinato accompaniment figures, and fugal treatment of the cantus firmus.

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