Ostinato and Variation

Form, Style, Genre

- The two main types of 'variation' forms
  - Ostinato: changing melodies over a constant bass line.
  - Variation: changes made to a melody.

- a.k.a
  - Ground Bass
  - Passacaglia
  - Chaconne

- Dates back to the beginnings of instrumental music.

  - Dance music: probably the latest to be

- Earliest collections come from the 15th century

- Devoted to a highly professional courtly dance for couples called:

  - in French: *basse danse*

  - in Italian: *bassadanza*

- The *bassadanza* is characterized by an ostinato pattern which recurs throughout the dance

  - Those early manuscripts give the ostinato line and nothing else; all the rest of it would have been improvised over the ostinato line.

- Ortiz published a little handbook called *Trattado de glosas sobre clausulas* in 1553

  - "Treatise on Ornamentation Over a Bass"

  - Informally: "How to Improvise Dance Music"

- A dance in duple time

- Two basic chord progressions were used:

  - *passamezzo antico*

  - *passamezzo moderno*

- These represent two of the five standard 'tenors', or ostinato lines, which were in common usage.

- Passamezzo antico

- Passamezzo moderno

- Romanesca

- Ruggiero

- Folia

- Such regular patterns -- chord progression, bass line, meter, overall phrase structure, and tempo -- could be used to create almost endless amounts of dance music.

- The pieces in the Ortiz *Trattado* are 'frozen' in time due to being examples, but performers certainly would have used them as models for improvisation -- as they should be used today.
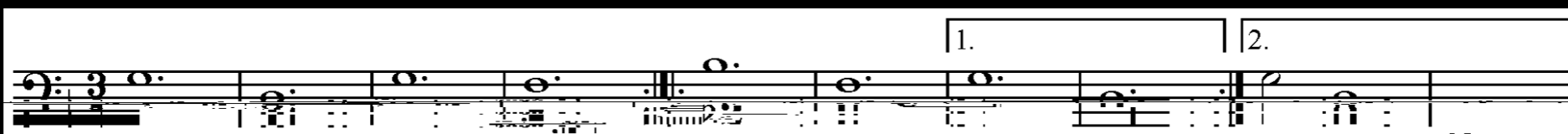
- Example from Ortiz *Trattado*

- *Recercada #2* bass line

- One of the most popular tenors in the history of music (appearing in the *Trattado*), and used by composers as diverse as:

  - Corelli

  - Marin Marais

  - Geminiani

  - Salieri

  - Rachmaninoff

  - Uncounted hordes of others

- The Folia tenor:

- Eventually the bass line attracted and standardized a melody above it.

- In its early days, though, the *Folia* tenor was without that oh-so-familiar melody.

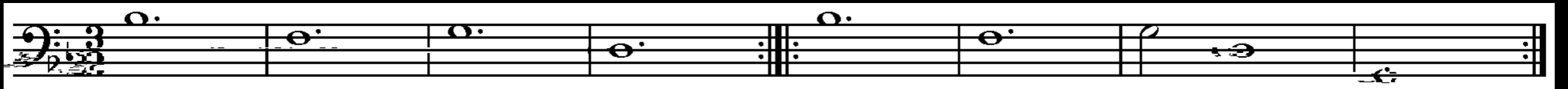- Anonymous example from ca. 1500, without that familiar melody.

- It wasn't too long before the familiar melody set in and became *the "Folia"* for most people.

- 17th century example, by British composer John Playford, published in 1684.

- This one has all the accoutr

- Consider the following tenor, called by Ortiz the *Romanesca:*
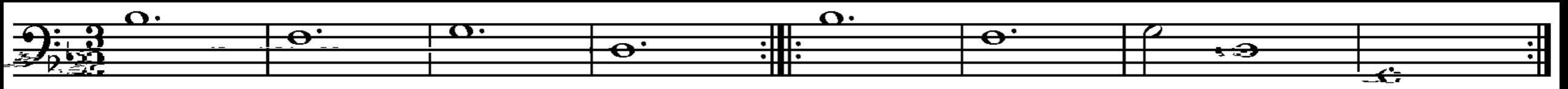
- Taken in and upon itself, it's nice enough, but it is about to become the bass line of one of the most familiar of all tunes in Western music. Can you figure out which one?

- It's *Greensleeves*, which has become in and of itself a tune subject to variations.

- But it is also an ostinato which can become the tenor of a passacaglia.

- Thus it is a fusion of the two main branches of variations -- ostinato, and variations on a tune.

- One of its very first appearances in Western music is in the *Trattado*, as "Ricercada #7".

- Ralph Vaughan Williams set "Greensleeves" in 1934, as part of his opera *Sir John in Love*.

- In the early days the two were distinct:

  - *Ciaconna* was a Portuguese dance (possibly originating in the New World) characterized by the motion I-V-VI-I in the bass.

  - *Passacaglia* was a slower dance, characterized more clearly by a stepwise descending bass I-V6-VI-V.

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- One *possible*

- Traditionally the *chaconne* is in triple meter (true of earlier examples) but both terms became metrically agnostic in the 19th-20th centuries.

- Interestingly enough, both terms became associated with a kind of über-serious severity during the 19th and 20th century, although actually they both have origins in light dance music.

- Violin Concerto in G Major "La Stravaganza", second movement.

THEME

- "When I am laid in earth" from *Dido and Aeneas*

- In most variation sets the individual variations will be grouped in such a way to produce coherence across the entire movement.

- Typically a loose three-part structure prevails:

  - Variations in primary mode

  - A shorter set in a secondary mode (slower)

  - A final set in the primary mode

- Although the theme itself may be of any structure, two-part song forms tend to prevail.
    - Each of the parts can be repeated as a variation in its own right.
    - The problem of repetition inherent in a three-part form is sidestepped by using a two-part form.

- Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 17 in G Major, III

- A technique in which two themes (or two versions of the same theme) are alternated with each other throughout a piece or movement.

  - Usually one of the themes is varied more than the other.

  - One of the themes may not be varied at all, in fact.

- The technique is a particular favorite of Haydn's -- who more or less invented it.

- Beethoven was also extremely partial to it in his variation movements.

- Haydn Symphony No. 53 in D Major "L'Imperiale", II