

ANDREW WILSON-DICKSON - BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

- Andrew Wilson-Dickson was born in London in 1946 and now lives and works in Cardiff, Wales. As a child he began to learn the piano at the age of seven and began to compose around the age of sixteen.
- After school, Andrew continued his studies at Cambridge University and then went to York University where he was one of the first students to take a D Phil in composition, studying with the composers David Blake, Wilfred Mellers and Richard Orton.
- Andrew has taught extensively throughout his life, both at Leicester University from 1971 and then, starting in 1984, the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama. He is active as a pianist, harpsichordist, organist and conductor. He also specialises in early music and founded the organisation Early Music Wales. He is also a writer on music and author of 'The Story of Christian Music'; he has composed an extensive body of work for use in church services.
- As a composer, Andrew has written for a wide variety of forces ranging from opera through all genres to keyboard and chamber music. He enthusiastically has drawn on a huge range of influences from early music, through English romantics, such as Arnold Bax, to a wide range of modernists.
- He writes of his present activities: "Almost complete retirement from the world of teaching has suddenly given me the opportunity to write and to play with the intensity that I have not known since university days. At the moment I am a little more cautious about committing my ideas to paper than I was in those days, but I have plenty of invitation to do so, for which I am extremely grateful".

TANGO PASSACAGLIA - BACKGROUND NOTES

tango passacaglia was originally written as a piece for a London-based tango band, but also exists in the version discussed here for flute and piano. It was composed in 2002 and the present version was made in 2006.

The work is in one movement lasting around 6-7 minutes.

CONCEPT

tango passacaglia is a tribute to the Argentinean tango composer Astor Piazzolla (1921-92). In the composer's words, "it honours Piazzolla's debt to Bach by embedding the theme of the Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor for organ, BWV 582, from start to finish". The theme consists of a ground bass threading its way through the entire piece which "can be found in the most unlikely places". The use of tonality is traditional, but moves between the style of "the eighteenth century to an extent (in deference to Bach) to late Romantic through deliberate references to early twentieth century British music, particularly Arnold Bax" (1883-1953).

- What is a passacaglia and what part does a ground bass play in it?
- What are the characteristics of a tango? What time signature would you expect it to be in and what kind of rhythms might you expect to find in it?

ANALYSIS

The different sections of *tango passacaglia* are as follows:

1 - 41	SECTION 1 (CROCHET = 120)
42 - 66	SECTION 2 (FLEXIBLE, SLOWER, DREAMY)
67 - 99	SECTION 3 (TEMPO 1)
100 - 132	RECAPITULATION OF SECTION 1 (BARS 8-33)
133 - 140	CODA

DETAILED RÉSUMÉ OF STRUCTURE

Section 1 (Bars 1-41). Crochet = 120

Section 1 is a presentation of Bach's ground bass theme followed by six short variations, with the theme moving through different parts of the texture in each.

1 – 6

Bach's ground bass theme is presented in the piano LH in the key of C minor. Bach's original is in 3/4, but is presented here in 4/4 time with the same note values (5½ bars with the final C overlapping into the next variation). See Example 1 for Bach's original theme and Andrew Wilson-Dickson's presentation of it.

Example 1a

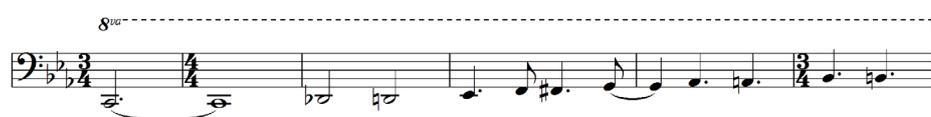


Example 1b



7 - 12

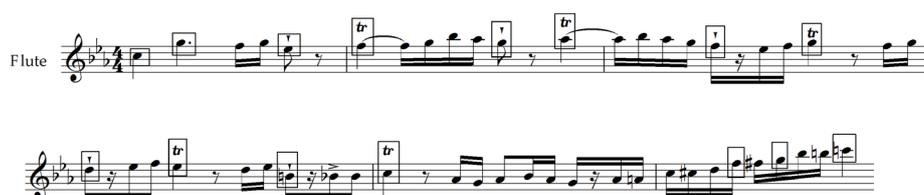
The theme now moves into the piano RH (as a two-part canon at the 7th) heard against a left hand counter melody (see Example 2),



chromatically ascending by step from C to B (with the E natural omitted). Three statements of a new idea are heard in the flute, each more elaborate and longer than the last (the first is 4 beats long, the second 5½ and the last 10). Note how it is dominated by the notes C – E flat – G. The key is still broadly C minor.

13 - 18

The theme appears here in a decorated form in the flute part (mainly on long, trilled or accented notes – see Example 3)



heard against an ascending scale in the LH (C minor harmonic with a sharpened 4th, culminating on a D flat). The previous LH counter melody is now heard partially descending in the upper piano RH (bars 14-15). The rhythm of the RH harmony is arranged in different rhythmic groupings of 3+3+2 quavers.

34 - 41

The theme appears low in the flute in its original note values (with the final two notes in the piano at the start of bar 39). The piano has chromatically descending common chords, sevenths and diminished chords in semi-quavers, recalling the counter melody at bars 7-12 (NB. the A flat is missing in bar 36, but is added at the close in bar 37). An upward flourish in the flute also moves through all 12 notes of the chromatic scale.

- What is the difference between the use of the ground bass theme here and in Bach's original passacaglia?
- Is the ground bass theme repeated in exactly the same way as it first appeared every time it is used?
- What is the main feature of the counter melody heard in the piano LH between bars 7-12? Where else can this idea be found in the opening section?

Section 2 (Bars 42-66). Flexible, Slower, Dreamy

A slower quasi-improvisatory section, less rigorously organised than the opening 41 bars. There are two variations. Although the original pitches of the ground bass theme are retained, the music moves through a number of suggested keys without ever settling in one.

42 - 58

A long passage in which the theme is stretched out through the whole section. The initial four notes of the theme are heard in the flute (bars 42-45). The G then passes to the piano (47), A flat (enharmonic G # at 48), F (50), G (51 piano and flute), D (flute 51), E flat - B (enharmonic D# at 53 in the piano, both heard simultaneously in the context of a chord of G# minor), F & C (55 as an F major chord). The highly decorated surface is underpinned by a very slow harmonic rhythm. A brief reference is made in the flute at bars 55-58 to the orchestral work, *Summer Music* (1917-20) by Sir Arnold Bax.

59 - 66

A melodic presentation of the theme in the flute is presented against a series of seventh chords that cloud the tonality.

- What is the difference between the way the theme is used in Section 1 and the first part of Section 2 (bars 42-58)?
- Is it possible to identify one home key for the whole of this section?
- Is the theme ever transposed during Section 2?

Section 3 (Bars 67-99). Tempo 1

A central section, closer to tango stylistically than any other part of the work.

67-72

The theme is presented with its original notes values in the flute part, over a rhythmic piano part, mainly centred around A flat major.

72-83

A variation falling into two sections: the first (bars 72-78, features the flute repeating the theme from bars 67-72, starting a beat earlier (ie. on the 2nd beat, rather than the 3rd in bar 67). The piano part is based on the previous section. From bars 78-81, the theme is heard in octaves in the piano RH against a falling counter-subject in the flute.

84-95

The theme is embedded in the centre of the piano texture (from bar 85-89) retaining the original note values. A new tango-inspired theme, unrelated to previous material is heard in the flute (bars 84-87) and the piano (bars 92-95). For a brief period of five bars (91-95) the theme disappears from the texture.

96 - 99

A return to the material of bars 79-81 with the theme in the piano RH.

- How close is the use of the theme in bars 67-81 to the original as heard at the outset of the piece?
- Does the theme disappear from the texture at any point in Section 3 and, if so, where?

Section 4 (Bars 100-132). Tempo 1, Crochet = 120

Section 4 is essentially a return to the material of Section 1 with a literal recapitulation of bars 8-33 (bars 107-132).

100 - 106

The theme returns for the first time to the bass of the piano, as originally heard at bars 1-6, now with an added RH part.

107 - 132

An unaltered repeat of bars 8-33.

Section 5 (Bars 133-140). Coda

133 - 137

A repeat of the piano part from bars 100-104 with a new flute part.

138 - 140

A flute part rising up in major and minor 3rds covering 10 notes of the all chromatic. A cadence re-establishing C minor.

TONALITY

tango passacaglia follows the original passacaglia principle of retaining the ground bass at the same pitch at which it initially appears (C minor). However, whilst in Bach's original the theme is mainly confined to the bass, here it rarely appears in the bass after the initial opening statement (it returns to the bass at bars 100-05 & 133-37) and moves between the inner voices and top line. This means that the tonality is not confined to one key, as would normally be the case in a traditional passacaglia or variation form. It also means that the tonality surrounding the original ground bass can be changed or use varied harmonisations. Some examples of this are:

- The first section (to bar 41) is rooted in C minor, but the harmony frequently suggests other keys, without ever establishing an alternative. For instance, in bars 29-33, a series of chords, not functionally related to one another blur the underlying tonality.
- As early as bars 7-12, a chromatically descending countersubject to the theme (in the piano's bass) provides an alternative to the ground bass. This reappears in many guises, such as the chromatic harmonic descent in bars 35-39.
- The most extreme section in terms of moving from the tonality of the original theme is in bars 42-58, where the theme is stretched out over most of the section which moves through a highly chromatic series of harmonic progressions.
- Bars 59-64 show a transformation of the theme in the flute, with its C minor tonality harmonised through a series of chords with octatonic inflections.

- Give two examples of how the C minor tonality of the theme is blurred or undermined?
- What does the word octatonic mean?

TEXTURE AND SONORITY

In *tango passacaglia* both the flute and piano parts are of equal importance, with sometimes one or the other predominating. The textures and sonorities are mainly traditional, but are constantly used to differentiate between the sections and make the structure clear.

- The first section (bars 1-41) gradually moves, variation by variation, farther from the world of Bach to one based on post-Debussy textures, arriving at a different type of texture altogether for the second section (bars 42-65)
- In the first part of the second section (bars 42-58) much of the piano part consists of held chords, often articulated in arpeggiated form, giving them depth and density (stretching across 3-4 octaves). The flute writing here is florid and quite different from any of the other sections, matched by passages of similar writing in the piano RH.

- Which particular section of the work is radically different to the others in terms of its use of texture and sonority?
- How are the long-held piano chords in the first part of Section 2 given weight and depth?

HARMONIC LANGUAGE

The composer describes the harmonic language in *passacaglia tango* as “traditional (with a bass line rooted in the eighteenth century and clearly punctuated cadences) but with a highly decorated surface, which is an intentional debt to some modern composers of the early twentieth century”. The music passes through several different types of harmony, reflecting these shifting changes of style, some examples of which are given below:

- Nowhere do we find a precise imitation of functional harmony as Bach might have used it but, in the first section, it resembles the use of harmony as found in the later nineteenth century Bach transcriptions of Liszt or the neo-Bachian style of Franck (albeit with certain dissonances that would not be found in these composers’ music, such as the piano RH in bars 20, 22-23).
- A passage between bars 35-38 moves to the harmonic world of the next section via a chromatic piano figuration as might be found in Rachmaninov’s music.
- The second section (bar 42-66) is the most harmonically complex and chromatic of the whole work with deliberate references, in the composer’s words, “to early twentieth century British music, particularly Arnold Bax”. This consists of a very slow harmonic rhythm made up of a series of unresolved altered sevenths and appoggiaturas which suspends any resolution into a settled key until the following section (from bar 66).
- The third section moves harmonically towards the idiom of tango and Astor Piazzolla. Use is made of parallel 6/4 chords in the RH (bars 67-69 & 75) over a tonic pedal (the tonality here is A flat major).

- Name three of the different composers whose styles are evoked in *tango passacaglia*.
- The second section (bars 42-66) makes much use of discords; are these resolved in the conventional manner and, if not, how are they used?
- Are there any direct quotations from other composers in Section 2? If so, then from whom and where does it appear?

TEMPO, METRE & RHYTHM

TEMPO

There is one main tempo for *tango passacaglia* (crochet = 120) contrasted with a “flexible, slower, dreamy” tempo for Section 2.

METRE

The composer writes, “This piece (unlike others of mine) is relatively unsophisticated in this area, except the inherent tension of a passacaglia in 3/4 serving a tango in 4/4”. The original metre for Bach’s passacaglia is 3/4, but this is immediately heard at the outset in a 4/4 metre, giving the ground bass an entirely different metric character. Unlike the original Bach theme, it now becomes irregular in character (see Example 1)



and the original anacrusis disappears entirely throughout the piece. However, there are many other modifications to the metrical organisation of the ground bass throughout:

- At the beginning of bars 7-12, the metrical stresses are changed by starting with one bar of $\frac{3}{4}$.
- At bars 13-18, the theme takes on a completely different character when it is transformed into a theme with new note values and added decorative notes.
- Between bars 18-23, the theme is embedded in a running line made up, pre dominantly, of semiquavers and is identified by its notes being accented. Here a new metrical tension is introduced, with a $\frac{3}{4}$ rhythmic pattern stretched across bars of $\frac{4}{4}$ with the accents falling on the second and third beats of the pattern. A similar $\frac{3}{4}$ pattern across $\frac{4}{4}$ is also found in bars 29-33
- In bar 66, the $\frac{3}{4}$ theme is again used in $\frac{4}{4}$, but this time starting on the second beat of the bar, whilst in bar 73 it is started on the third beat.

The use of a ground bass (or, indeed, traditional variation form) can normally impose a rigid phrase structure on a piece, as in the Bach original which, initially at least, consists of a series of 8-bar periods. However, here, the different variations are characterised by asymmetrical period lengths: $6\frac{1}{2}$ (bars 1-6), $5\frac{1}{2}$ (bars 7-12 mixing $\frac{4}{4}$ & $\frac{3}{4}$ bars), 6 (bars 13-18), 5 (bars 19-23), $4\frac{1}{2}$ (bars 24-28), 5 (bars 29-33) and so forth.

- What is the difference metrically between how Bach presents the theme and how it is presented in the opening bars of *tango passacaglia* ?
- Although the original pitches of Bach's theme are nearly always followed, the rhythm can often change. Please give two examples of this.

DYNAMICS

Dynamics are often used to shape sections and plot climaxes. In *tango passacaglia* they are used to make contrasts between sections and to highlight the work's moments of drama.

Some examples are:

- After the initial *p* statement of the ground bass, much of the remainder of Section 1 is loud and energetic and this creates a strong contrast to the soft romantic character of Section 2;
- The central section use dynamics throughout to create contrasts between loud and soft attacks, and the section overall moves gradually towards its loudest point at the end (bars 92-93);
- The return to the material of Section 1 and the return of the ground bass to the LH of the piano (for the first time since the opening) is achieved by returning to the *p* dynamic of the outset.

RESOURCES

CD: Catherine Handley / Andrew Wilson-Dickson. HAL 004

Score: Fieldgate Music. 15762c.39.ekmpowershop.net

Website: www.wilson-dickson.co.uk

The author would like to thank Andrew Wilson-Dickson for reading through this analysis and providing suggestions and amendments to the original script.