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Folia and Sarabande

[Jan 27, 2016](#) / [terry](#) / [6 comments](#)



Listening to variations on a theme is one of my great musical pleasures. I remember the original notes and am fascinated by how they change. The comfort of the old plays with the excitement of the new. Sometimes I am amazed by how much more can be said about something I already know. Sometimes I am more impressed by the many different aspects of one message.

This posting is about two of the most popular themes in Classical music and their variations. Be forewarned: such catchy tunes may stay in your head for a while.

Basso Ostinato

Western music often uses a bass line to set the rhythm and to determine the chord progressions. In much of Renaissance and Baroque music the same bass line repeats throughout the piece. The melody is played (and widely varied) in the higher registers while the basso ostinato (stubborn bass) continues in the lower. The meaning is in the high notes, the rhythm in the low. The idea of the “tenor” as the voice that “holds” the melody can also describe the main line of thought in spoken or written communications.

In some ways, this type of music is very similar to the way we speak. The fundamental of the voice is determined by the vibrations of our vocal cords. These vibrations continue throughout our speech. They provide a basic pitch and their on-and-off rhythm determines the cadence of our speaking. The meaning of the speech is then determined by modulating the higher harmonics of the sounds to give consonants and vowels.

The ground bass is the underlying structure of such forms as the Chaconne, the Passacaglia, the Folia and the Sarabande (Ross, 2010). It provides a stable rhythmic and harmonic structure for the melody to play upon. Many of these musical forms came into prominence in the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th and 16th Centuries. Some likely derived from medieval folk tunes. Some may have arrived from the New World or the Canary Isles.

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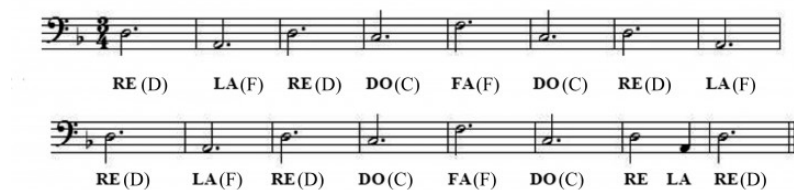
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La Folia

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La Folia appears to have begun in Portugal. The word means “folly” or “madness.” Italian spells it “Follia.” Various versions finally evolved into the “late Folia” (Hudson, 1973; Gerbino & Silbiger, 2016):



Diego Ortiz (1510-1570), a composer in the Spanish court, wrote several *ricercadas* based on La Folia (1553). A *ricercada* is a form of variation, often using several melodies, and sometimes playing these together in a fugue. The following is the eighth *ricercada*, played by Jordi Savall and his colleagues:

Vm
P

The most common of the chordal progressions built on the bass line of La Folia is in D minor, as illustrated in the following example (from Campenon & Rustique, 2012) which has a very simple melody in the upper register:

The 16-bar chord progression is

/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___ /C___ /Dm___ /A7___ /
/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___ /C___ /Dm A7_ /Dm___ /

Corelli

The most famous piece of music to use this progression is the Violin Sonata XII of Opus 5 (1700) of Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), an Italian composer working in Rome. The following is the beginning of the sonata played by Andrew Manze (violin) and Richard Egarr (harpsichord):

Vm

P

This is the first page of the [sheet music](#):



Corelli's sonata was immensely popular. One of his pupils, Francesco Geminiani (1687-1762) arranged the sonata for a string orchestra in 1726, while he was composing and teaching in London. London was quite taken with *La Follia*. The following selection is the latter half of the Geminiani adaptation as played by *Les Violons du Roy* under the directions of Bernard Labadie.

Vm

P

In the years after Corelli, the theme of *La Follia* was widely used by many different composers in many different contexts. The internet hosts a great website on [Corelli](#) (Campenon & Rustique, 2012), and a truly magnificent website devoted to [La Folia](#) in all its manifestations.

Sarabande

While in London, Geminiani's violin-performances were often accompanied by George Frideric Handel at the harpsichord. In 1733 Handel published his Suite No. 4 in D minor for Harpsichord (HWV 437). One of its movements is a Sarabande, a stately dance in three-quarter time (Hudson & Little, 2016).



Handel's Sarabande uses a 16-bar progression similar to that of La Folia:

/Dm___ /A7___ /F___ /C___ /Gm___
 /Dm___ /Gm___ /A7___ /
 /Dm___ /A7___ /F___ /C___ /Gm___
 /F___ /Gm A7___ /Dm___ /

Compare this to La Folia:

/Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___
 /C___ /Dm___ /A7___ /
 /Dm___ /A7___ /Dm___ /C___ /F___
 /C___ /Dm A7___ /Dm___ /

Though similar, it is clearly not the same. However, as the webpage on [La Folia](#), states "this piece breathes the same atmosphere, and most likely Handel had the Folia-theme in mind when composing this Sarabande." Indeed the movement became known as "Handel's Folia."

The following is the beginning of the Sarabande played by Alan Cuckston:

Vm

P

Together with the [sheet music](#) for the theme:



Variations

In 1897, The Norwegian violinist and composer Johan Halvorsen wrote a lovely series of variations on Handel's Sarabande for violin and viola. Halvorsen's virtuosity as a violinist was only matched by the elegance of his moustache. The following is the beginning of his variations as played by Natalia Lomeiko (violin) and Yuri Zhislan (viola):



Vm
P

In the 20th Century the popularity of La Folia increased. In 1929 Manuel Ponce wrote a set of guitar variations for Andre Segovia. And in 1931, Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) wrote a bravura set of piano variations on La Follia. In the following clip, Mikhail Pletnev plays the theme and first seven of the twenty variations:



Vm
P

I shall conclude this posting with the main title theme from Stanley Kubrick's 1975 film *Barry Lyndon*: Handel's Sarabande as arranged for the National Philharmonic Orchestra by Leonard Rosenman.

The movie is characterized by

stunning photography, with many of the indoor scenes lit by candles. (I have appended a still photograph of the opening scene.) The music is perfectly chosen to represent the time and the place. The film won Academy Awards for both Cinematography and Musical Score.



Vm
P

References

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- Savall, J., et al. (1998). *La folia: 1490-1701*. Bellaterra: Alia Vox. (Sound recording) (The liner notes contain an excellent brief history of La Folia by R. V. Nery.)
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6 comments



G.T.

Apr 13, 2016 at 12:24 am

I especially like the slow and magnificent sarabandes and pavaues of Bach, Handel, Ravel and Faure. While listening, it may transcend me imaging the elegant, slow-movement dance in the court in 16th and 17th centuries (although Ravel's Pavane pour une Infante defunte and Faure's pavane were composed in the 19th century). But this is the first time I heard Handel's La Folia that I love the tune so much. The National Philharmonic Orchestra played it with such touching and melancholic way. Thanks so much for sharing so many variations and knowledge.

[Reply](#)



Eugene Braig

Jan 1, 2022 at 11:33 am

Just stumbled across this lovely blog article and felt included to inform you of Ferdinand Rebay's (1880–1953) lovely Variationen über eine Sarabande von Händel for solo guitar. I've heard it performed in concert by one of the members of SoloDuo (forget which had at this), but the only commercially released recording of which I'm aware is Leopoldo Saracino's on Da Vinci Classics.

[Reply](#)



terry

Jan 1, 2022 at 5:05 pm

Many thanks for the comment. I was not aware of the set of variations by Ferdinand Rebay. I have now listened to them on YouTube by SoloDuo. Very intriguing sound. I mentioned the Manuel Ponce variations for guitar in the posting, but I was unable to get a good performance of them. There probably is a recording by Segovia somewhere but I was unable to find it. Happy New Year to you !

[Reply](#)



terry

Jan 2, 2022 at 3:42 pm

Thank you for introducing me to Rebay. I have been listening to his violin/viola and guitar sonatas. Lovely!

[Reply](#)



Rich(ard D.) Janda

Feb 20, 2022 at 9:15 pm

Rakmaninov commented on his own Corelli Variations in a 1931 letter to a friend — the composer N. K. Medtner — quoted in R. D. Darrell, Liner-notes to VOX SVBX 5456, Rachmaninoff: Piano Music, Volume 1; Michael Ponti, pianist: "I've played the Variations about 15 times, but, of these 15 performances, only one was good. The others were sloppy. I can't play my own compositions! And it's so boring! Not once have I played these all in continuity. I was guided by the coughing of the audience. Whenever the coughing would increase, I would skip the next variation. Whenever there was no coughing, I would play them in ... order. In one concert, I don't remember where — some small town — the coughing was so violent that I played only 10 variations. My best record was set in New York, where I played 18 variations. However, I hope that you will play all of them, and won't 'cough'." Note that this piece was never recorded by its composer!

As for the 1929 "(20) Diferencias sobre 'La folía de España' y fuga" by Manuel María Ponce Cuéllar (1882-1948), a.k.a. Manuel Ponce, see what you think of a Naxos recording by Dale Kavanagh uploaded to YouTube on 12/16/2021 and accessible (at least as of 02/20/2022) via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nyOTjn9MmCs>. At least for me, this performance does full justice to the wonderful astringencies of the work, but I'm not a guitarist ...

[Reply](#)



terry

Feb 21, 2022 at 9:29 am

Many thanks for the link to Dale Kavanagh's recording of Manuel Ponce's variations. I agree that she plays very beautifully, and I have checked out some of her other recordings. I recently found a version of the Ponce variations by Segovia but he did not play all the variations, and I think Kavanagh's recording is much better. But I also am not a guitarist 😊 I was not aware of Rachmaninoff's aversion to his own set of variations. I like them more than their composer.

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"The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility" (Einstein, 1936)

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