First Suite in E-flat for military band:

Chaconne or Passacaglia?

Composed by Gustav Holst

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As a staple of the wind band repertoire, Gustav Holst's *First Suite in E-flat for Military Band* is well known to performers and educators alike. The suite consists of three movements: Chaconne, Intermezzo, and March. Though called a Chaconne, the first movement could be considered a misnomer. Many conductors label this movement as a passacaglia with a theme and 15 movements. The Harvard Music Dictionary defines a passacaglia as a continuous variation based on a clearly distinguishable ostinato that normally appears in the bass but occasionally transfers to an upper voice. A chaconne is a continuous variation in which the theme is a scheme of harmonies usually treated so that the first and last chord are fixed, whereas the intervening ones can be replaced by substitutes. In the next few pages, the *First Suite* will be analyzed as if it were a chaconne and/or passacaglia and thus clarifying the form in a historically accurate manor.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) was one of the most prominent English composers of his generation. With the fortune of being born into a musical family, Holst entered the Royal College of Music in London at age nineteen. His studies focused on composition along with piano and organ. After sustaining injury to his right hand, Holst picked up the trombone and left the keyboard instruments behind. It is partly because of the years of experience playing trombone in professional orchestras and bands that he was able to learn the practical possibilities of the orchestra and the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument; this along with extensive study of Berlioz *Treatise on Instrumentation*(Holst 1968, p. 2-20).

After trying his hand at Opera, Holst realized that the symphonic development and leitmotif of the popular Wagnerian opera were not suited to his musical tastes and were "equally hopeless for his sort of tune." He and his friend from the Royal College of Music,

Ralph Vaughn Williams, set out to bring about a "renaissance of English music" (Young 1976, p. 557). They were idealists who were both dedicated to the development of an English nationalist style, especially since German's had dominated England since Purcell and Handel. The style that developed was the folk song. Since folk songs are of the people, the use of folk song brought about a bridge to greater music appreciation and national pride. Holst and Vaughn Williams composed against the grain of their contemporaries by using old baroque principals in form and simplicity. When Gustav Holst's *First Suite in E-Flat for military band* was written in 1909, it foreshadowed the Neoclassicist movement in the 1920s and 1930s (Stith 1970, p. 5).

The *First Suite* has three movements: Chaconne, Intermezzo, and March. The entire work is derived from the same theme, which is pictured in Figure 1. In this simple melodic figure, the musical line is moving stepwise, rising or falling. This is followed by a skip or leap by a fifth or inversion of a fifth, a fourth. This is true but one exception. The melodic line ends on the fifth, which harmonically implies a half cadence, but also leaves the potential of an authentic cadence (Budd 1982, p. 58). The implied half cadence lends itself to the repetitious and cyclical nature of the first movement.

Though the simplicity of the theme suggests a folk-like sound, this particular theme cannot be traced to any known folk song. It is most likely that Holst composed it himself, pulling inspiration from other English folk songs. In it's original scoring, the *First Suite* is written for British military band, furthering the evidence that the work is exhaustively British (Budd 1982, p. 28).

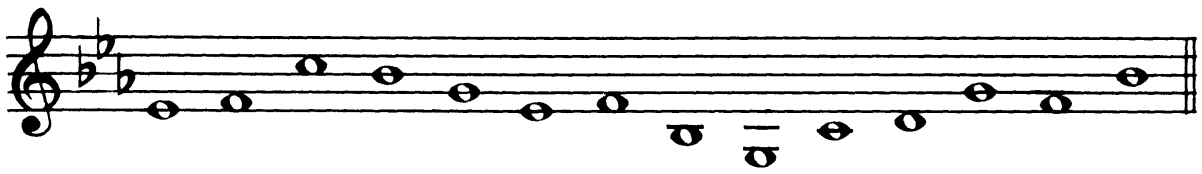

Figure 1

The Intermezzo and March are equally as iconic and important as the Chaconne, but as the purpose of this paper focuses on the Chaconne movement, I will not go into much detail on the second and third movements of the suite.

In the opening statement of the first movement, the main theme is stated, in the rhythm pictured in Figure 2, six times without interruption in the bass. This is a technique used by other baroque composers like Henry Purcell and William Byrd. This type of writing is called grounded bass. Kent Kennan defines ground bass as a short melodic line that occurs repeatedly in the bass (Kennan 1987 p. 270). Ground bass is also referred to as *basso ostinato*. However, after the sixth iteration, Holst breaks this mold moving the theme into the upper voices.

The rhythm that was used for the theme was typical of Medieval-English two-part songs in contrasting patterns of quarter and half notes, thus keeping the English tradition and contributing towards an English nationalist character (Budd 1982, p. 28). The time and meter of this phrase are critical. It is seen in Figure 2 that the theme is eight bars long, however, Holst destroyed the sense of timing when he tied the last b-flat of the phrase over the bar line omitting a down beat on the eighth measure.

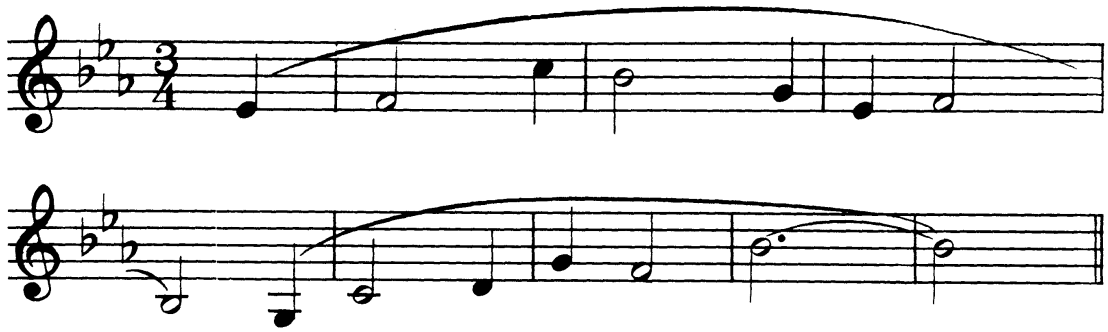

Figure 2

The Chaconne movement is built on sixteen iterations of the initial theme. All but three are the same. The tenth and eleventh statements are inversions of the theme seen in Figure 2. The inversion still begins on e-flat but moves in the opposite direction. This can be seen in Figure 3. The other variation that is different is the last iteration. The theme is transposed up a fifth and has a chromatic alteration, plus an extended ending which ends the movement itself.

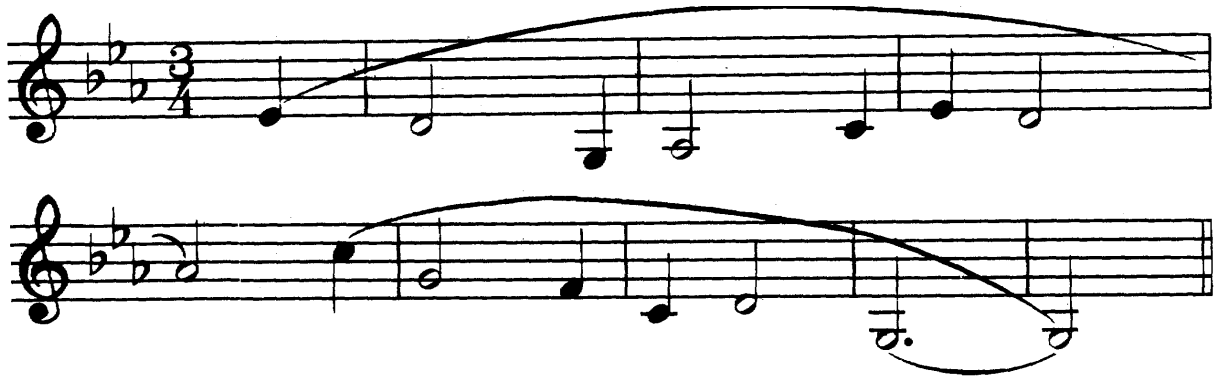

Figure 3

Holst could not completely abandon the romantic style of his contemporaries. This can been seen in his use of seventh chords, ninth chords, diminished triads, and diminished

seventh chords. Concurrently, he incorporated many elements of the baroque practices. There is a very strong tonic-dominant feel in both the melody and harmony. A technique used by Bach is a tonal inversion of the melody. This is the melodic line seen in Figure 3.

The Chaconne does conclude in a traditional way. As mentioned earlier the last iteration of the theme is transposed up a fifth and uses a d-flat, on the dominant pitch of b-flat, Figure 4. There doesn't seem to be any particular purpose to this change other than the desire to change things up at the last minute.

Figure 4

Now that the technical theory behind the first movement is established, I would like to focus on the form of this movement. As stated before, there is some dispute on which form this movement more closely fits: chaconne or passacaglia. Many articles, reviews, and score analyses that I read in preparation for this paper briefly mention that this movement is not a chaconne, but a passacaglia. It was not stated as an important piece of information, but rather like a fun fact. Since the movement is titled Chaconne, I believe the chaconne form merits consideration as well.

It is first worth noting that the definition of chaconne and passacaglia has evolved. The definitions from the baroque era are slightly ambiguous. This is because the terms were used interchangeably and in some cases the forms were combined into a single

composition. Examples of this include *Les Nations* (1726) by Girolamo Frescobaldi or *Pieces de Violes* (1728) by Francois Couperin. From this point, definitions used will be based on the most common distinctions observed today.

The passacaglia and chaconne share many similarities. Both forms derived from sixteenth century Spanish dances. It is reputed that it was introduced to the New World as a quick, dance-song characterized by suggestive movements and mocking texts. From here the form evolved into a slow triple meter that is most often seen in choccones and passacaglias of the last four centuries. Kent Kennan states that both the passacaglia and chaconne are traditionally in minor, but there are plenty of pieces, including the Chaconne from the *First Suite,* that are in major. J.S. Bach's *Violin Partita in D Major* weaves through both the major and minor modes (1987 p. 273).

Traditionally the theme for the passacaglia is heard alone at the start and is usually eight bars long. As we have already observed, the beginning of the first movement of the *First Suite* does indeed begin with an eight bar introduction in the euphonium and tuba. The passacaglia is often compared to the ground bass, which also begins in such a way. The passacaglia differs from the ground bass because it has been observed that the repeated lines in the passacaglia are "more exciting and musically satisfying" (Kennan 1987, p. 273) And while that is a matter of opinion, a line with rhythm is typically regarded as more "exciting" than a line consisting of only whole notes.

Variations in the passacaglia tend to start quiet and increase in animation as the piece progresses. This can be seen in the first movement of the *First Suite*. The macroscopic design is characterized be two big crescendi. There is a slight diminuendo after the first crescendo, but the piece eventually swells back up leading to the climax at the end of the

movement. This is also represented in the build of orchestration starting from a tuba/euphonium soli at the beginning to a full texture at rehearsal mark B. The orchestration thins significantly to a soloistic texture, like the brief decrescendo, at rehearsal C until the build to the finale. This begins before D and leads to the climax at F.

One of the more important characteristics of the passacaglia is that the theme commonly moves into the upper voices for variety. Out of the sixteen iterations of the theme, there are six times where the theme is not found in the lower voice. Therefore, the theme is found ten times in the bass. The progression of the theme can be seen in the chart at the end of the paper. Figure 6.

Connections and distinctions could be generalized about the length of the passacaglia and chaconne, but there are some works that are recognized for their extreme use of repetition in this style. Bach's Passacaglia in C minor for organ has twenty variations and his Chaconne for unaccompanied violin has thirty.

As stated before, the main similarities between the chaconne and passacaglia are the ¾ time signature, and of course the repetition in the bass. It is understood by nineteenth and twentieth century theorists that the biggest difference between the two is that in the passacaglia the basis for the variation is in the melodic line; in the chaconne, the variation is in the harmonic progression. This is observed rather arbitrarily because there are other theorists in the same era who claim the other way around. Since I am using Kent Kennan's definitions of the two for analysis, the remainder of the paper will be based on the former definition: Passacaglia is based on variation in the melodic line and Chaconne based on variation in the harmonic progression (Kennan 1987, p 273).

Where the passacaglia varies by moving the theme around into other parts, the chaconne creates interest by differing harmonies and substituting them into the original theme. The important factor is that the first and last harmonies remain unchanged. Figure 5 shows the break down of the chordal analysis in each variation. It can be observed that each theme begins on a tonic harmony. Variation 11 and 12 both begin on a minor vi instead of the major I chord. This does not change the function of the first chord because the minor vi and major I chord both function as a tonic since they have two scale degrees in common. Another way of viewing this is that there is a brief modulation to the relative minor and the minor six becomes a minor i chord. Either way it doesn't conflict with the chaconne criteria listed above.

The last harmonies have a similar set up. Almost all of the variations end on a V chord except variations ten, eleven, and sixteen. What is seen in variation ten and eleven is the chordal analysis as if the piece had not modulated into the relative minor. The small print next to the cadence column indicates that the variation ends in a half cadence in the relative minor, keeping with the function of the V chord used in every other variation. Variation sixteen does end in a viio, which does have a dominant function. However, it was stated earlier that this variation is transposed up a fifth and includes other chromatic notes that are unaccounted for no other reason than for musical interest. This theme is also extended for effect and is longer than the eight bars that all of the other themes are bound to. It may be presumptuous to say that Holst purposely broke the mold for a traditional chaconne in favor of returning to Romantic influence. If this were to be the case, one would need to either disregard the last variation or refrain from analyzing this piece as if it belonged to one period of style, mainly the baroque chaconne.

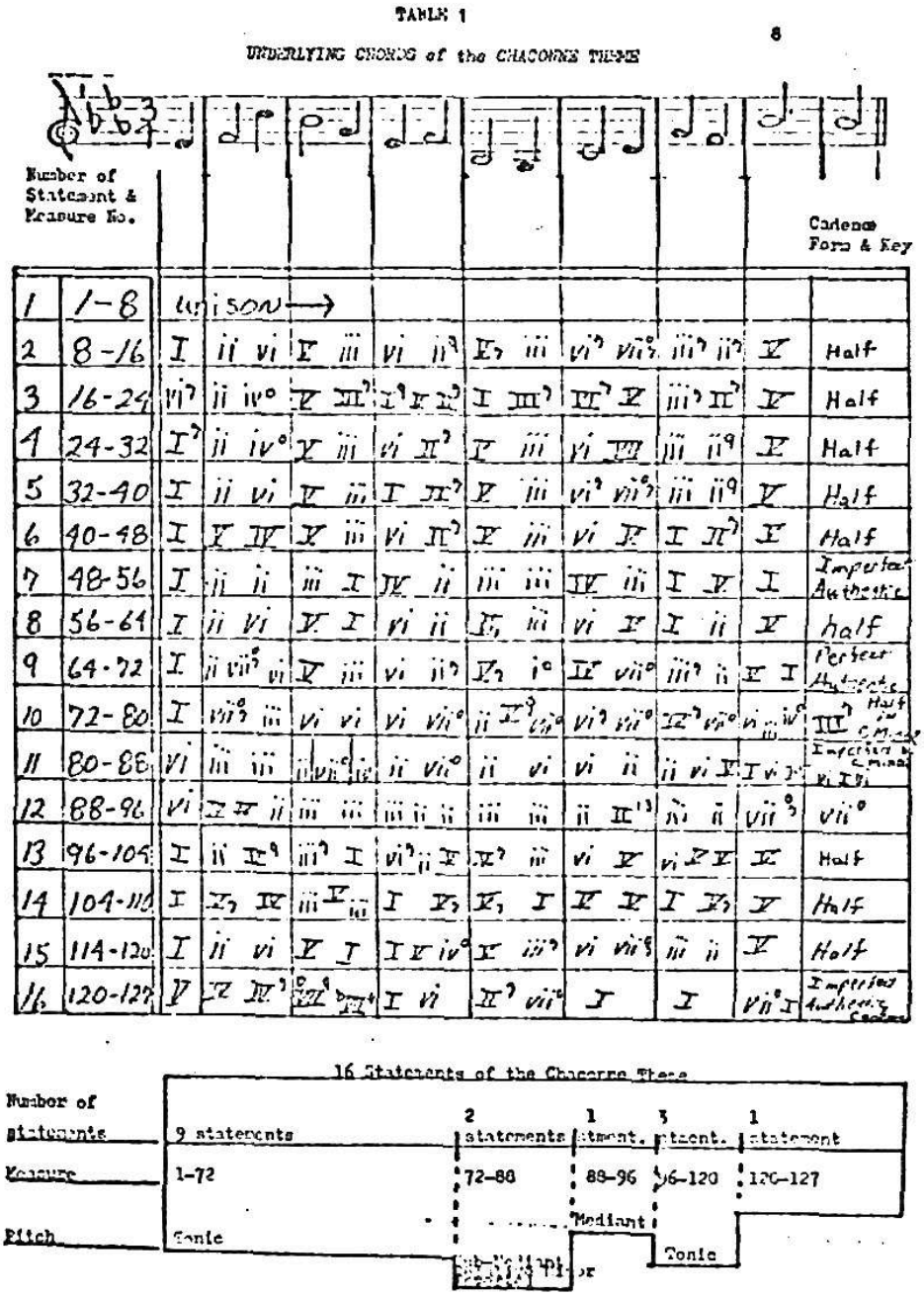

Figure 5

After examining the movement according to modern definitions, it seems that the first movement does not clearly fit one definition over the other. If the deciding definitions

are reduced to Passacaglia being based on variation in the melodic line and Chaconne based on variation in the harmonic progression, then the first movement must be considered as both a chaconne and passacaglia.

Formal analysis aside, it was stated that the chaconne and passacaglia were used interchangeably in the baroque period. It seems that the dividing line even today is not so clear-cut either. If this were the case, then any modern attempts to distinguish the two would be unfounded and historically inaccurate. And while defining the piece one way or the other may be satisfying to anyone uncomfortable with ambiguity, the definition doesn't influence the performance practice of the piece. When played by an ensemble, the main objective is to hear the exchange of the theme throughout the parts and is a good study for a young composer on ways to expand on a good musical ideas. This movement showcases the genius of taking a traditional form and tailoring it to newer musical ideas.

Phrase Chart – Chaconne

Measures	Music	Scoring
1–8	Chaconne Theme	Euphonium, Tuba (doubled in String Bass) in E♭ Major
9–16	Variation 1	Cornets, Trombones
17–24	Variation 2	Winds (doubled in String Bass)
25–32	Variation 3	Theme in Euphonium, Tuba (doubled in Baritone Sax) Counterstatement in Winds and Saxes
33–40	Variation 4	Theme in Low Brass, Low Reeds New Counterstatement in Winds, Saxes, Cornets, Horns
41–48	Variation 5	Theme in short note values in Brass, Low Saxes Sixteenth note Countermelody in Winds
49–56	Variation 6	Theme in Cornets, Horns *Pesante* Eighth Note line in Low Brass, Low Reeds
57–64	Variation 7	Theme in Solo Horn (doubled in 3rd Clarinet) Additional obligato parts in 1st & 2nd Clarinets
65–72	Variation 8	Theme in Solo Alto Sax Accompaniment in Solo Flute, Solo Oboe, E♭ Clarinet
73–80	Variation 9	Inversion of Theme in C Minor Scored in 1st & 2nd Horns (doubled in Alto Sax & 3rd Clar.) Accompaniment in upper Winds
81–88	Variation 10	Inversion of Theme in Cornets, Euphonium Bass line Accompaniment in Bassoons, Tuba

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