

Ostinatos and Accompanied Canons

Ostinatos may be considered another type of imitation. However, an ostinato does not change. Its powerful unifying impact comes from being repeated. Most often that repetition is immediate and continual in the same voice although, in a broader sense, an ostinato can be shared between multiple voices. When a bass line ostinato is repeated, it is traditionally called a ground bass or basso ostinato. When the ostinato is a chord progression, it is traditionally called a chaconne and often contains a ground bass, too. Both the ground bass and chaconne are usually short passages of music that are repeated throughout a tune. Many elements of music can be structured to function as an ostinato; for example, a repeating rhythmic pattern as in a drum set pattern or a recurring timbral envelope as in post-spectral music.

On the large, architectural scale, an ostinato occurs, in a more broader sense, whenever the song itself is used for improvisation. That is, as the harmonic progression is repeated over and over again for the soloist's improvisations, the song form itself has become an ostinato. And by far the most common ostinato use in popular music is the bass ostinato, traditionally called the ground bass.

A DAY IN TAHITI

This contemporary example uses a ground bass. It sequences the first measure down a step, with some intervallic diminution, in the second measure to create a two-measure ostinato that repeats throughout the A section.

The image displays a musical score for a piano piece in 4/4 time, featuring a bass ostinato. The score is divided into three systems, each with four measures. The first system (measures 1-4) shows a bass line with a repeating eighth-note pattern: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. Above the staff, chords Ebmi7, Dmi, Ebmi7, and Dmi are indicated. Annotations include 'bass ostinato:' with a bracket under the first two measures, 'modified sequence: down a step' with a bracket under measures 3-4, and 'mm. 1-2 combined = two-measure ostinato: repeats throughout the melody' with a dashed bracket over measures 1-2. The second system (measures 5-8) and third system (measures 9-12) continue this pattern, with the bass line repeating the ostinato and the treble staff showing melodic variations. Measure numbers 5, 9, and 13 are marked at the start of their respective systems.

FIG. 6.1. "A Day in Tahiti" Excerpt, Example of Bass Ostinato

Notice also the almost ostinato-like melody. The first two-measure section in the treble voice then recurs twice, the first time with some slight variation and the second time as an exact repetition.

MOVING FORWARD WITH THE GROUND (Or "Under the Ground" as in Purcell's "Lament")

"When I Am Laid in Earth," from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* (premiered 1689), is a song that uses a ground bass. The bass ostinato is six measures long, begins by chromatically descending to the dominant, and concludes with a traditional cadential formula (scale degrees 4-5-1). This ostinato is repeated eleven times. The song, or aria, is also called "Dido's Lament" because Queen Dido sings this lament before stabbing herself to death as her lover, Aeneas, sails away.

The image shows a single line of musical notation for the ground bass of Purcell's "When I Am Laid in Earth." It is written in a 3/2 time signature with a key signature of two flats (Bb and Eb). The bass line consists of six measures of whole notes: G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The notes are chromatically descending from G2 to B1.

FIG. 6.2. Purcell, "When I Am Laid in Earth" from *Dido and Aeneas*, Bass Ostinato

What chords support this chromatically descending ground bass? Add the first vocal phrase, and we can see the harmonic implications. (Non-chord tones are circled.)

Chord symbols: Gmi, D, G7, C/E, Cmi/E \flat , D, Gmi/B \flat , Cmi, Gmi/D, D, Gmi

Vocal lyrics: When I am laid... am laid... in earth. may my wrongs... cre - ate (no trouble...)

FIG. 6.3. Purcell, "Dido's Lament," Bass Line and Vocals, Measures 1–6

The sadness of the music supports the poignancy of the lyrics:

*When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast;
Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.*

RECITATIVE AND ARIA

In opera, two basic types of singing are used. The *recitative* is used to describe the action or plot and is delivered fairly quickly with a simple rhythm, one note per syllable, and as a single line (monophonic). The other type of singing is the *aria*, like "Dido's Lament." It is lyrical, full of musical expression for the voice with many melismas (multiple notes per syllable of text). The recitative precedes the aria and sets the stage for the emotional outpouring and/or reflection of sentiment in the aria.

ACTIVITY 6.1. WRITE YOUR OWN MELODY TO PURCELL'S GROUND BASS

Using Purcell's ground bass, create your own melody in your own musical style. Include harmonic analysis (chord symbols over the treble clef or Roman numerals under the bass clef), and be mindful of your use of non-chord tones.

OSTINATO WITH CANON

Figure 6.4 shows the beginning of "Dido's Lament" with a version of the melody arranged canonically at the octave; leader and follower voices are separated by two measures.

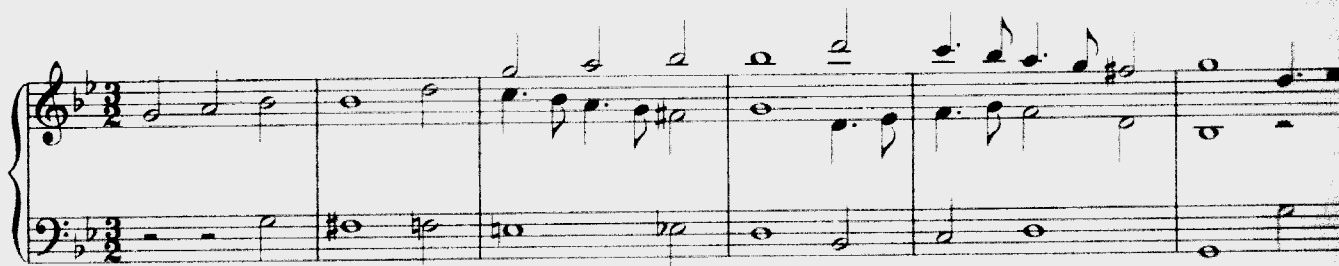


FIG. 6.4. Purcell, "Dido's Lament," Bass Line with Canonic Treble Lines (modified melody), Measures 1-6

OSTINATO FOR MULTIPLE VOICES

What if the bass ostinato is made up of two parts instead of one? Both parts must work together as a short unit that repeats. For example, figure 6.5 presents a three-measure bass ostinato:

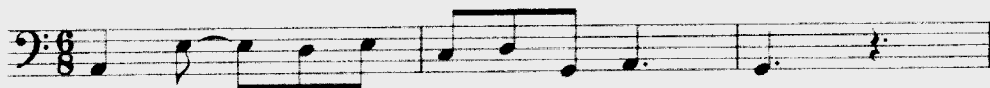


FIG. 6.5. Bass Ostinato 1

Let's add another voice on top of that first one:

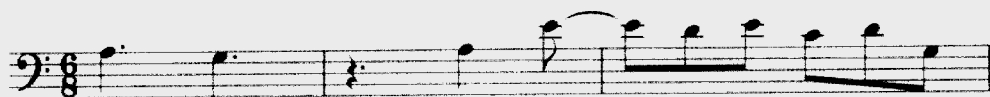


FIG. 6.6. Bass Ostinato 2

Do you see the motivic relationship between the two voices when we combine them together (figure 6.7)? They are playing the same music an octave apart and separated by three beats. This is also an example of double counterpoint: a/b followed by b/a.

FIG. 6.7. Bass Ostinati 1 and 2

Now let's add the melody:

FIG. 6.8. Bass Ostinati 1 and 2 with the Melody

And finally, add one more contrapuntal technique to this atmospheric example to complete the composition. We can make the melody canonic by adding a follower voice an octave down in measures 5–9:



Audio 31

FIG. 6.9. "Ancient Winds" Bass Ostinati 1 and 2 with Melody in Canon

When there is a canon with an additional, non-canonic line, it is called an accompanied canon. Look carefully at the bass ostinati. Notice that the two voices exchange places every three beats. In this case the canon is accompanied by two bass ostinati working together in double counterpoint.

The "Sumer" canon is another example of a canonic piece with two voices providing the bass ostinato in double, also called "invertible," counterpoint.

RETURNING TO "SUMER"

In chapter 4, we learned that "Sumer" is a round and a canon. Here are the first twelve measures of "Sumer," written out as a four-voice canon.

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Sumer Is Icumen In," presented as a four-voice canon. The score is divided into two systems, each containing four staves. The first system shows measures 1 through 6, and the second system shows measures 7 through 12. The music is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature (C). The four voices are arranged in a canon, with each voice entering at a different point in time. The first voice begins in measure 1, the second in measure 2, the third in measure 3, and the fourth in measure 4. The score illustrates the intricate counterpoint and the exchange of roles between the voices, as well as the presence of bass ostinati in the lower staves.

FIG. 6.10. "Sumer Is Icumen In," Four Canonic Voices, Measures 1-12

An additional, interesting piece of information: “Sumer” was written in the Medieval 2 period (1000–1400 CE) when accompanied canons with the non-canonic line(s) in the bass were referred to as “pes,” Latin for “foot.” In other words, the canonic lines are standing on the foot, the “pes.” In the “Sumer” case, the pes is an ostinato of two voices in double counterpoint.

ACTIVITY 6.2. CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES OF OSTINATOS

What is more common in so many styles of popular music than the ostinato? It is not the ostinato itself that makes the music so effective; rather, it is how the composers/performers write and improvise over the repeating material. Here are a few examples: why do these work so well? How do you use ostinati in your music?

- Avicii, “Wake Me Up”
- Alesso, “Cool”
- Beatles (McCartney), “What You’re Doing”
- Beyonce (Tegor and Bogart), “Halo”
- Cream (Bruce), “Sunshine of Your Love”
- Daft Punk (Williams and Rodgers), “Get Lucky”
- Herb Ellis (Giuffre), “A Simple Tune”
- Mancini, “Peter Gunn Theme”
- Pink Floyd (Waters), “Money”
- Radiohead (Yorke), “Creep”
- Shaw, “Partita for 8 Voices”
- Yellow Jackets (Ferrante, Haslip, Lawson, Russo), “Wildlife”

When a non-canonic line accompanies a canon, the piece is called an *accompanied canon*. Both the “Ancient Winds” and “Sumer” canons are accompanied canons. The additional, non-canonic voice is *accompanying* the canonic voices. This non-canonic voice is often a bass ostinato, repeating a short section of material, as often found in contemporary music.

PACHELBEL’S CANON IN D

Possibly the most popular canon from the classical (Baroque) tradition is *Canon in D* by Johann Pachelbel. One finds many interesting settings of this piece including comedic string performances, folk rants, and Korean hip-hop versions.

“Canon in D” begins with the non-canonic line in the bass called the “ground bass” or a “basso ostinato.”