

**Notes for the Film, USA: DANCE--FOUR PIONEERS  
Including Doris Humphrey's "Passacaglia"**

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Producer: Jac Venza  
Director: Charles S. Dubin  
Associate Producer: Virginia Kassel  
Writer: Bo Goldman  
Narrator: Alvin Epstein  
Assistants to the Producer: Virginia Gray, Madeleine Bloom  
Additional Music from "Frontier" and "Primitive Mysteries" by Louis Horst  
Drum: Nona Schurman  
Still Photographs: Barbara Morgan  
Animation: Wardell Gaynor  
Cameraman and Film Editor: Eugene Marner  
Production Facilities: Videotape Productions of New York, Inc.  
Associate Director: Ken Rockefeller  
Technical Director: Joseph Polito  
Lighting Designer: Fred Manning  
Audio: Gino Lombardo  
Video: Ed Henning  
Produced by National Education Television  
With the aid of Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Charles Weidman, Doris Humphrey Estate, Martha Hill,  
William Bales, Norman Lloyd, Dwight Godwin, Helen Priest Rogers

Date of film: 1965

Length of film: 29 minutes

## Passacaglia

Choreography: Doris Humphrey (1895-1958)

First performance: August 5, 1938, Bennington, Vt., The Armory

Film Performance:

Danced by The American Dance Theater

Staged by Lucy Venable

Soloists: Lola Huth, Chester Wolenski

Organist: Richard Grant

Original performance:

Soloists: Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman

Members of the Concert Group: Billy Archibald, William Bales, Mirthe Bellance, George Bockman, Harriette Anne Gray, Frances Kinsky, Katherine Litz, Katherine Manning, Edith Orcutt, Beatrice Seckler, Sybil L. Shearer, Lee Sherman

Members of the Apprentice Group: Barbara Page Beiswanger, Sara Jean Cosner, Gloria Garcia, Maria Maginnis, Ethel Mann, Claudia Moor, Pegge Oppenheimer, Ruth Parmet, Barbara Spaulding, Patricia Urner, Mildred Zook

Musicians: Morris Mamorsky and Vivian Fine, piano

Costumes: Pauline Lawrence

### 1. The Four Pioneers

The first half of the film consists of a documentary on modern dance in the 1930s, particularly the Bennington phase. It serves as an able introduction to the personalities and the perspectives of the period, although the narrator's characterizations of the state of ballet at the time probably reflect the views of the modern dance pioneers better than they reflect fully considered reality.

The documentary is reasonably self-explanatory, intelligently incorporating still photographs, Bennington scenes, views of a present day dance class using Graham technique, and period film clips (some of which are probably better played at silent speed--18 frames per second.)

One of the clips, unidentified on the film, is worth special attention. It shows Doris Humphrey and group in a moment from her "Air for the G-String" filmed in the early 1930s (400).<sup>1</sup> Even in this fleeting excerpt one can sense something of the theatrical presence of the dancer-choreographer in this work, at once ethereal and sensuous, an effect apparently choreographed down to the movement of an eyelash. The film captures, for example, an ecstatic look upward in which she raises or brings into expressive action in rapid, but distinct, sequence the arms, head, eyes, mouth, and then neck.

A number of examples of the superb still photography of Barbara Morgan are presented, but not identified, on the film. Shown beginning with Hanya Holm's comments, "We'd all have our own companies..." (210) are two stills from Humphrey's Passacaglia, three from Graham's Primitive Mysteries (1931), and several (as identified) from Holm's Trend (1937). Shown beginning with Martha Graham's

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers in the text refer to approximate film footage markings on the takeup reel. 100 feet of film covers a bit less than 3 minutes; 900 feet takes exactly 25 minutes.

comments, "You have a little fragile..." (300) is a still from her sardonic solo on ceremonious behavior, Sarabande (1934), one from her commentary on Emily Dickinson, Letter to the World (1940), several from her shrouded solo of mourning, Lamentation (1930), and several more from her exuberant solo of the American west, Frontier (1935).

The viewer is also given a glimpse of the Armory at Bennington, including its limited stage and spartan surroundings where Passacaglia was first performed (200). The work was not confined to the stage when danced here, however. Rather it spilled over onto the apron in front of the stage with the audience area being pulled back to make space.

## 2. Passacaglia

The second half of the film contains a performance of Doris Humphrey's Passacaglia (sometimes called Passacaglia in C Minor or Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor). The dance work was created in 1938, went out of the Humphrey-Weidman repertory in 1943, and was revived in 1955 by Humphrey for a repertory class at Juilliard. At the time of its revival the work was rendered into Labanotation by Lucy Venable and Joan Gainer. This notation score was used by Venable to stage the 1965 version seen on this film and it has also been used by many college dance groups and classes to perform the work. The soloists on the film, Chester Wolenski and Lola Huth, had also learned the dance under Humphrey's direction in 1955 (Venable, pp. 7-8).

Passacaglia is performed by the "American Dance Theater," a professional group put together for a 1965 season of repertory modern dance at Lincoln Center in New York. The group no longer exists. The filming, produced by National Education Television, has been carried out very intelligently; the camera work is unobtrusive and sympathetic to the shape of the choreography.

Passacaglia is danced in this film by a lead couple and by a chorus of 5 men and 9 women (the number of dancers in the group was designed to be potentially variable from performance to performance). It is set to J.S. Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor and leaves an overall impression of great dignity, nobility, and serenity.

### Humphrey's program

As Margaret Lloyd (pp. 108-09) has observed, Humphrey had something of a program in mind when creating the work. The reiterated theme in the fugue section, for example, "was to her man's reiteration of faith in his ideals, despite the struggle of attaining them, the stretto passages of the fugue constituted the struggle, mounting in the resolution to a majestic paean of faith."

It is not currently fashionable to append such high-minded sentiments to works of art, and a knowledge of the program can even hinder an appreciation of the work for some. Selma Jeanne Cohen, in her fine biography of the choreographer, notes, "Beginning in the mid '50's, the climate of artistic taste started to turn away from the values associated with her era: away from dance as an expressive language; from dance as a vehicle for comment on the human condition; from dances structured with the clean, precise logic of conflict, development, and resolution" (p. 224).

Nevertheless, Passacaglia is fully capable of communicating to a modern audience--of being profoundly moving in fact. One can still marvel at the theatrical power, the careful craftsmanship, and what Deborah Jowitt calls "the wonderfully uncompromising nature" of the "movement vocabulary" where "nothing looked anything like ballet."

In addition, while one can hardly fail to notice the seriousness of intent and the apparent grandeur of conception, it is possible to appreciate the work as an abstract movement statement without necessary explicit reference to Humphrey's program. This is the case in part because the message in Humphrey's

work is not expressed through symbols, labels, or role-playing, but rather, as Cohen observes, through the "complete fusion of form and content. Drama is inherent in the kinetic idea....The struggle for balance was the striving for the maintenance of life itself....Then the suspension on the top of the breath phrase--was the achievement, the mastery over darkness, turmoil, disorder....It was simultaneously pure movement and pure drama. It did not refer to a particular person in specific time or place; it was an abstraction of the nature of man" (p. 230).

Furthermore, it is not entirely clear how knowledgeable Humphrey expected the audience to be about her program. In an early program note, reported by Cohen (p. 149), she was quite explicit about it. The work, she wrote, is to be treated

as an abstraction with dramatic overtones. The minor melody, according to the traditional Passacaglia form, insistently repeated from beginning to end, seems to say "How can a man be saved and be content in a world of infinite despair?" And in the magnificent fugue which concludes the dance the answer seems to mean--"Be saved by love and courage."...[The dance was inspired by] the need for love, tolerance and nobility in a world given more and more to the denial of these things.

By the end of 1938, however, she toned down the message considerably:

The music has been used as a departure point for the creation of an abstract composition with dramatic overtones. The persistently repeated phrase in the minor mode suggested to the choreographer man's reiteration of faith in his ideals despite an imperfect world. Originally written for organ, Passacaglia is built on an 8-bar theme stated at the opening and concludes with a 4-voice fugue.

And by late 1939, her program note was almost entirely a matter-of-fact commentary on the formalities of music with an aside about the "moods" of the dance work:

Passacaglia was originally a stately court dance, later becoming a musical form much favored by composers. An 8-bar theme is always stated at the opening and is repeated to the end with complex figurations. In this instance Bach's famous Passacaglia in C minor, opening with an exceptionally beautiful melody, and finishing with a 4-voice fugue, illustrates the composer's genius for using traditional form with warmth and feeling. The dance, though not a visualization of the music, follows it closely in moods ranging from the delicate and tender to the heroic.

Then in notes from 1940 and 1941, she attempted to clarify the extent to which the dance composition can be considered dramatic (specifically pointing out that one of the moods expressed is "lightheartedness"), returning somewhat to the original idea of the program:

Passacaglia (A musical form similar to variations from a ground bass). This dance is known technically as an abstraction, which is highly misleading as a title. Actually each movement and each phrase is dramatic in origin. The dancers are expressing moods here--at one time it is heroic courage in the face of adversity, at another it is light-heartedness. Sometimes, as in the fugue, various individuals start up from the crowd as though stating a belief. The mistake is to look for a dramatic story any more than one would look for it in a symphony. What holds the whole composition together is the tragipathetic melody, repeated from beginning to end, like the credo of one who clings to simple faith.

Finally, however, from late 1941 until the work went out of repertory in early 1943, her programs returned to the second-to-last note, where it is suggested simply that the dance follows the moods of the music.

Therefore, it seems justifiable to treat the work in formal terms, stressing Humphrey's theatrical craftsmanship without necessarily applying the specific emotional connotations she happened, at one time, to give to certain choreographic elements.

### The music

Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor, composed about 1717, is one of the more popular masterworks in the literature of music. Its aura of "peaceful grandeur and ordered complexity," in Lloyd's phrase, was exactly what Humphrey needed for her purpose. Composed originally for pedal harpsichord or organ, Bach's work frequently is heard in orchestrated versions. The performance on the film uses organ; in the premiere, Humphrey relied on a piano, although she was to come to prefer the organ in later performances. In choreographing the work she used an orchestrated version by Leopold Stokowski on 78 rpm records.

The passacaglia and fugue sections of the Bach work are performed without pause. As a musical form, the passacaglia originated in dance forms and is most austere. It is a theme and variations in which the theme, slow and in three-quarters time, is a simple ground bass covering eight bars. The grave and stately theme in Bach's work is given in Figure 1.

Once stated, the theme is then repeated 20 times in the passacaglia section, each time accompanied by different musical material. In most of these variations, the theme can be heard unaltered and clearly pronounced in the bass; in a few it is varied or carried in an upper voice. The variations differ in mood, intensity, and color and are carefully arranged and connected for dramatic effect. As B.H. Haggin observes in his excellent introductory analysis of this composition, starting from the simple, spare, expression of the theme, the passacaglia builds to a powerful conclusion in the 20th variation--but the intensity and complexity don't increase in a single, unbroken pattern. Rather, there are relaxations along the way.

It is also important to observe, in Haggin's words, that music "can say more than one thing at a time, and that what you hear most often is not a line of sound but a texture. When there are several clearly defined lines or voices moving at the same time, as in these variations, you have counterpoint." Humphrey's approach to these contrapuntal musical patterns will be of special concern later.

The first part of the ground bass theme serves as the subject for the fugue which begins immediately after the thunderous conclusion of the 20th variation. In a fugue the subject is treated a little bit like a melody is treated in a round like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat": there are a series of prominent entrances of the basic musical idea that seem to overlap. Then, accompanying these dramatic fugal entrances are a pair of agitated countersubjects and separating some of the fugal entrances are passages, called episodes, built mostly of material from the countersubjects.

There are, therefore, a pair of dramatic contrasts. The stately, confident subject is contrasted with its agitated accompaniment, and the twelve prominent entrances of the subject are contrasted with the episodic material separating them.

In addition there is, as in the passacaglia, a dramatic progression. Intensities and textural densities alternately build and lessen, and the complexity and independence of the episodes becomes greater making for an almost cathartic effect when they do finally give way to a new entrance of the principal fugal subject whose restatement they seem increasingly to have delayed. A climactic final statement of the subject leads to a serenely confident concluding passage.

### Humphrey's approach to the music

In the foreword to her The Art of Making Dances, Doris Humphrey recalls, "music was my first

love and I was led to dance through that...I came to love dancing very much, almost as much as music." The music of Bach appealed to her particularly. As a child, she recalls, "I heard Bach's 'Air for the G-String,' which so stuck me to the heart that it was almost the first dance I composed as an independent choreographer." In the course of her career, in fact, Humphrey was to create nine dance works to the music of Bach, and she was working on a tenth, Brandenburg Concerto No. 4, at the time of her death in 1958. (For a listing of her works, see Cohen, pp. 274-88.)

But reverence for a piece of music is no guarantee that a dance composition set to it will succeed as an art work. The test, as in all dance works, will be the creative power of the choreography, complicated now by the fact that it must somehow relate to a great piece of music. Two methods have sometimes been proposed for avoiding this complication. One is to use only mediocre musical compositions to ensure that the dance work will not be overshadowed and that a great musical work, created after all for its own sake to stand alone, will not be desecrated by banal visualizations (a criticism, for example, of the Walt Disney film, "Fantasia"). The other, adopted by Merce Cunningham and others, is to let the music be created entirely separately from the dance, the two being merged only at the time of the first performance so that coordination between dance and music becomes a matter of chance juxtaposition for which no one has to take apparent responsibility.

Great dance works have been created using each of these methods, and each has had its share of tedious disasters. The opportunity both deliberately avoid, however is one Humphrey wishes to explore in Passacaglia: if the choreography to a great musical work is put together with imagination, taste, and an intense musical awareness, the combined impact can be overwhelming with the music making a major contribution to the theatrical effect; one cuts oneself off from such aid only at considerable cost. Furthermore, the musically sensitive in the audience will not be kept in a state of schizophrenic discomfort as they try to concentrate on the dance while ignoring the distracting aural horrors or banalities that saturate the air around them.

To an extent, Humphrey's Passacaglia proceeds from the tradition of "music visualization" that became such a fixture in modern dance in the 1920s. But while Humphrey wants the dance to reflect the moods that are in Bach's composition, she intends the dance work to make a visual statement of its own, a kind of fitting counterpoint to the music itself. "It is essential to keep the ear sensitive," she says, "but also to remember that the dance is an independent art, subject to laws of its own which can lead the choreographer to movements not really indicated in the score at all" (p. 135).

In a letter written shortly before her death, she elaborated (Cohen, p. 261):

Early in the nineteen-thirties I discarded the idea of music visualization. It seemed quite unnecessary, and indeed false, to force the dance to follow music exactly. The arts have such utterly different media that the dance could only be damaged by being cut to fit every phrase, every beat and every measure. Moreover, it was a redundant practice. As the composer has said it all once, why repeat it in movement terms? So I evolved a theory of relating the dance to the music while leaving each its individuality intact. This results in a dance and music partnership in which neither dominates nor imitates the other, in short a true collaboration.

### Motifs, imitation, counterpoint

The ideas of theme and variations, suggested by the passacaglia, of sequential imitation, suggested by the fugue, and of counterpoint, suggested throughout Bach's composition, all find application in the dance work, but their use does not usually correspond directly to their equivalents in the musical work.

1. In what could be taken to be partial analogy to the theme and variations idea, Humphrey

makes use of a limited number of gestural motifs, dance ideas that appear throughout the work in various contexts and distortions. Some of the more prominent of these will be briefly described.

The principal motif is illustrated in Figure 2: forearms held parallel to the floor and to each other in front of the dancer's body, usually with the legs astride and bent. This is probably the most famous dance motif from Passacaglia, made so in part by an exquisite photograph by Barbara Morgan of Humphrey in the pose which serves as the frontispiece for The Art of Making Dances. In the course of Passacaglia, this simple motif occurs hundreds of times in several variations. Sometimes it is held as a pose; at others, while in the pose, the arms are jerked percussively to one side and then to the other; or the arms are swung so they pass smoothly through the pose without pausing in it; or else they are swung into the pose, pause in it for an instant, and then are jerked sharply away.

Another motif is suggested in Figure 3. It is seen both as a held pose and in several kinetic variations. In the most important of these the arms are brought together, without bending, to meet in front of the body.

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate two motifs which use hand clasps: a hand to wrist clasp with the arms raised and a hand to hand clasp or a palm to palm press with the arms in front of the body. Both are closely associated with the parallel forearm motif in Figure 2; the image in Figure 5, in fact, could be considered a variation of it.

Humphrey was always fascinated by the ideas of balance and imbalance, developed as part of her notions about fall and recovery (see Lloyd, pp. 84-86; Cohen, pp. 117-19, 229-32; Jowitt). As indicated above, the drama inherent in such contrasts had special meaning for her. There are literally hundreds of places in the dance work where this tension is explored. A prominent motif that illustrates this is seen in Figure 6: a sprawling lean that seems on the verge of collapse. One dramatic variation on this idea occurs when the dancers swing the overhead arm and the free leg down and around to spin the body in a series of swinging turns.

Another idea that occurs frequently is a simple toe-first walk that, used in various speeds, sometimes suggests a processional, sometimes a scamper.

A flowing, moving, elevationless leap that appears frequently in the work is found in Figure 7.

A final motif, illustrated in Figure 8, is a floor position used at several points, most dramatically near the end.

2. If the idea of theme and variations, as suggested by the passacaglia of Bach's music, is reflected by analogy in the use of motifs with variations in the dance work, the fugal idea can perhaps be said to be paralleled when the dancers sequentially imitate each others' movements. That is, throughout the dance work, but particularly in the fugue portion, there are passages where one dancer or set of dancers will duplicate the movement pattern of another dancer or set of dancers beginning after the first group has begun, but before it has completed, its statement of the phrase. Sometimes such canonic imitations are quick and fleeting, only a small part of the total dance texture, but at others, particularly near the end of the work, they are developed with great deliberateness, in several layers, for dramatic impact.

It should be stressed that these overlapping sequential imitations do not correspond with the statements of the principal fugal subject in Bach's music. The statements of the fugal theme have special dramatic meaning for Humphrey and each is treated as a special entity.

3. Counterpoint is a third musical idea that finds expression in the dance composition. Although, like the musical work, content to deal with a limited number of images, Humphrey develops her material

with considerable complexity. Two or three different movement patterns are frequently being danced at the same time and total unison movement is saved for a few climactic moments.

At the same time the contrapuntal passages exhibit remarkable clarity of design. The different simultaneous phrases, while distinct and independent, always seem to be appropriate to each other and to contribute to a single combined theatrical statement. Thus the choreography is never fussy or unduly convoluted; in fact it still gives the overall impression of being quite simple and straightforward (see Humphrey, p. 93).

As with the theme and variations and the fugue ideas, the use of counterpoint does not directly relate to its use in the music. When several different phrases are being danced simultaneously, it is often found that one of them does correspond to one of the concurrent musical lines, but that the others don't--thus they form counterpoint not only to the other dance line, but also to the music. As Humphrey has written, "Often the movement is in counterpoint to the music, both in rhythm-phrase and tempo....However, this is so skillfully done, I say with pardonable pride, that at worst there is no jar to the onlooker, and at best he sees and enjoys the fitting together of the two entities" (Cohen, p. 261).

These then are some of the materials from which Passacaglia is crafted. Like the music, there is a certain economy in the construction, a preference for inventively exploiting a limited number of basic ideas rather than continually inventing new ones.

The austerity of the Bach work is paralleled in other ways. There are no exits or entrances, so the dancers' endurance cannot be extended by offstage breathers. There are no lifts--indeed, the dancers rarely touch each other. There are no props and the set, typical for Humphrey, consists simply of a set of boxes arranged to form risers at the back of the stage. The choreography for the men rarely differs from that for the women so that, for the most part, only movements that both can do well can be used, and their particular differences in strength or ability cannot be exploited. And, especially, obvious pyrotechnics are prohibited by the nature of the program and by what Humphrey takes to be the import of the music.

As Selma Jeanne Cohen observes, "Apollonian by temperament, Doris disliked excess in anything--in sound, in decor, in movement; constantly pruning, condensing, taking away until only the essentials remained" (pp. 226-227).

### The dance composition

The dramatic development for the two sections of the dance work, the passacaglia and the fugue, is similar and, in some ways, almost resembles a chess game. In each section the audience first sees a carefully arranged cluster of dancers from which emerge peripheral members of the chorus who perform brief solos or duets. The cluster is broken apart as the two soloists come forward and lead the ensemble in more complex choreographic patterns. A climax is reached near the end of each section as confident unison movements grandly cut through the kinetic flurry. Each ends with a quiet pose.

Throughout the work, the total group remains the essential visual unit: "Solo dances flow out of the group and back into it again without break and the most important part is the group," as Humphrey expressed her aesthetic in 1936 (Cohen, p. 241).

The passacaglia. The 16 dancers are arranged in a symmetric cluster on a set of risers as the work begins; their backs are to the audience, their arms held overhead as in Figure 4 (490). They hold this pose through the playing of the theme allowing the music to present or announce itself without competition--a rather reverent attitude that is partly repeated at the end of the dance work.

The first five variations of the twenty that comprise the passacaglia section are given over to the



emergings and re-mergings of four women from the group. Throughout, the rest of the cluster remains intact and mostly immobile. In the first variation two girls on the audience's right slowly turn, in slightly delayed sequence, to face the audience. As they do so, their arm position smoothly evolves to introduce two of the motifs: that of Figure 3 for the first girl and that of Figure 2 for the second.

They join hands and, in the second variation, emerge from the cluster in a stately, high-stepping processional that takes them in front of the group to a position on the left.

The third variation summarizes--or celebrates--most of the elements so far developed by presenting them once again in choreographic counterpoint: as the two girls reverse their processional to return to their original places, the rest of the dancers slowly turn, their arms moving to the parallel position of Figure 2 and two women on the left of the cluster, in a position symmetrical to the first pair, like them, join hands.

The two pairs of women exchange positions in the course of the fourth and fifth variations which continue some of the processional idea and introduce a new gesture: a single arm curved overhead--which can be viewed as a suggestion of, or a variation on, Figure 4.

Variations 6 through 11 are devoted to developing the lead couple and to gradually deploying the chorus.

In the 6th variation the male lead emerges from the center of the cluster and moves toward the audience. He does so in a series of deliberate expansive gestures of affirmation, a thematic idea that will reappear often in the work in many guises. Meanwhile, the rest of the dancers are presenting a variation on the parallel forearm motif (Figure 2). Keeping their arms in a constant relative position, they move them, in two percussive jerks, first to one side and then the other. The choreographic pattern is a reflection of Bach's theme (see Figure 1) which can be visualized as a series of double "movements," each pair separated by a pause or a hold. The dancers' movements, however, do not correspond directly to the "movements" in the passacaglia theme, which is clearly audible in this variation. The aural and visual themes seem rather to accompany each other.

At the start of the 7th variation the lead woman comes forward to join the man. She repeats with him the expansive, opening-out gestures, which are now developed to include fleeting references to the parallel forearm motif and to Figure 6. The chorus, still on the risers, stands and repeats the double percussive movement of variation 6, this time with hands in front of them as in Figure 5.

This arm position is picked up by the two leads in variation 8 where they incorporate it in choreographic combination with more references to the expansion idea. The group, meanwhile, has faced to the left and, arms to sides, moves in procession off the risers. As it does so, it pauses from time to time, turning to face the audience, fleetingly duplicates the movements of the leads (who remain downstage), then returns to the processional.

The processional continues during the 9th variation until the chorus is deployed in a line across the stage from left to right between the lead couple and the risers. The processional incorporates various references to already-introduced material including the parallel forearm motif and the expansive gestures. The 9th variation is the first to introduce fast--allegro--movement into the work. This is given to the leads who, while the chorus is on its deliberate procession, flow across the stage in a pattern that includes the introduction of the lovely oblique leaps illustrated in Figure 7. For the first time canonic imitation is used in the choreography as the girl's movements are set in delayed reflection to those of the man.

At the end of the 9th variation the lead man sweeps around the chorus and mounts the risers behind them for the extraordinary 10th variation in which he reflects from behind the slow, expansive,

motif-laden movements of the lead girl (who has remained at the front of the stage) while, between them, the group, in profile, arms to back, repeats the double percussive choreography they used before, but now it is found in jerks of the entire torso, not the arms (600). Both sets of movements relate to the passacaglia theme in the bass, but neither reflects it exactly.

The group processional resumes in the transitional 11th variation until its members are grouped at the back of the stage on the right side. The two leads join them there at the end of a rather lighthearted dance combination that contrasts with the stately processional.

Some of this allegro idea is continued in the 12th variation, as the leads are joined by two women from the group.

The music turns quieter in the 13th variation as the dancers softly form a semi-circle across the back of the stage.

In the course of the 14th to 17th variations various dancers emerge from this formation in small groups to perform.

The 14th variation is one of the most beautiful passages in the work (660). It is set for seven women (arranged five against two) in the flowing leap of Figure 7, with arms variously quoting the motifs of Figure 4 and 5. The music for this variation can be heard as a sequence of prominent "questions" in one line interlaced with a set of contrapuntal "answers" in another. Humphrey has the dancers move on the "question" portion of the music and seem to pause in suspended balance while the "answer" is played, then sweep once again into flowing movement.

The transition from this variation to the 15th is also remarkable. Toward the end of the variation the seven girls are joined by the two leads who dance their final phrase with them and then sweep to the front of the stage and directly into the series of rather slow pirouettes--turns on one leg--that dominate the choreography of the 15th variation. Except for a few brief references earlier, this is the first time pirouettes have been employed in the work, and they are introduced in a very deliberate manner and in close relation to the passacaglia theme in the bass, a spin in a different pose being associated with each held note in the melody. The leads have thus contributed two allegro elements to the cumulating dramatic structure of the work: pirouettes here and leaps in the 9th variation.

The 16th variation, for three men, and the 17th, for 4 women, are the only places in the work where sexual differences among the dancers are recognized, rather in the manner of classical ballet. The male trio is to very assertive music and consists of some forceful variations on the Figure 3 motif during a sequence of jumps. In addition, at several points the men start to suggest the pose illustrated in Figure 8 which is to be used so dramatically again at the end of the work.

The female quartet, on the other hand, scampers rather impishly across the stage in its variation. The arms are mostly held in the position of Figure 2 but, as the girls pair, are developed into a pose that can be taken to be a rather sweetened variation of Figure 4: side by side, each dancer raises her outside arm curved overhead.

The last three variations of the passacaglia section are carefully constructed to build to a dramatic conclusion.

In the 18th, the full body of dancers is brought into movement, an immediate contrast to the rather passive role most of them played in the preceding few variations. The broad, confident, unfolding gestures, clearly suggested by the music, are stressed: arms are spread, the stance is wide. The movement is deliberate; the pose is gradually altered into and then out of the parallel forearm position of Figure 2. And, for the first time in the dance work, massed canonic imitation is used with the two

soloists' dance combination being mirrored a few seconds later by the group.

The 19th variation introduces some rather spectacular swinging half-turns based on the dramatic teetering pose of Figure 6. The turns relate to a weaving figure in the music. Unison is approached as the leaders and most of the group execute this movement together. Four men in the chorus, however, are in opposition with a dance figure incorporating Figure 5.

Unison movement, then, is finally achieved in the climactic 20th variation. For the first half of the variation the swinging turns are presented in total unison and, for additional dramatic impact, they are doubled from the sequence of half-turns found in the 19th variation. While Bach's passacaglia comes to its powerful conclusion, the dancers pace backward in staggered procession to the risers where they cluster again and, on the last note of the music, fall forward in a lunge.

The fugue. There are twelve entrances of the subject in Bach's fugue, and Humphrey has chosen to treat each of them as a special dramatic statement. Each seems to emerge from the choreographic pattern without warning very much as the entrances in the music seem to assert themselves out of the musical texture.

The first entrance comes directly upon the last chord of the passacaglia (780). One girl rises and stands out from the group cluster with the broad, unfolding gestures of leg and arm that will be a choreographic feature typical of the fugal entrances.

The second entrance is given to one of the men from the chorus who rises from the middle of the group and gradually moves into arabesque position.

As he re-merges with the group, a girl near the front suddenly rises for the third entrance and then, supported by others, slowly leans far backward. She sinks slowly to the ground again with her legs assuming the pose of Figure 8.

The fourth entrance seems to be given to a girl on the left of the cluster. She rises and walks to the front of the group--over the backs of three crouching members. She is escorted in this maneuver by the lead man, and it quickly becomes obvious that the entrance has been used to bring him to the front, for the girl soon sinks into a kneeling position with the group, leaving him alone at the front.

He then has an exuberant solo for the fifth entrance featuring the expansive gestures of Figure 6, the flowing jump of Figure 7, and the clasped hand motif of Figure 5.

The sixth entrance with its following episodic material is softer and consists of the suggestion of a high-stepping procession with three members of the group being led by the soloist.

For the seventh entrance the tempo quickens as the lead male spins and flows across the stage and leads four girls out of the group. As he returns to the structure, they continue the allegro ideas, sometimes in unison, sometimes in staggered imitation, through the episode.

The eighth entrance (830) is given to the bulk of the dancers, still on the risers, who abruptly rise, proceed forward, and engage in a flurry of activity during the episode as the lead girl and two men are put in opposition to most of the rest of the group, each cued to "questions" or "answers" in the music.

At the start of the ninth entrance, all this activity dramatically halts as the dancers suddenly slide to the floor to pose in the position shown in Figure 8. The movement focus is on one man and two women, standing alone on the risers. They develop the expanding and processional motifs and, during the episode, move amid the rest of the dancers, stirring them into brief ripples of motion.

The lead man moves to the top of the risers for the tenth entrance. As with the ninth, all other

movement suddenly stops, and he is given the entire burden of expressing the powerful fugal entrance with a development of the teetering pose of Figure 6. He moves again among the seated dancers and, in a most beautiful sequence, seems to rouse them, group by group, into canonic waves of rises and falls.

He himself falls as the eleventh entrance is given to the lead girl on one of the risers to the left. She quickly comes forward to join him at the front of the stage and, during the extended episode, they turn and promenade while the rest of the dancers deliberately move into a clustered formation on the risers, with overhead hand-to-wrist clasp (Figure 4), as seen at the beginning of the work. As the episode nears its end, the members of the corps swirl back onto the floor in small groups (the swirls are clearly suggested in the music) until they are distributed around the stage behind the leads.

As might be expected, the final and most dramatic fugal entrance is introduced, like the final passacaglia variation, with unison movement--an idea Humphrey is determined to reserve for special moments (900). The unison dance combination weaves in several elements: the parallel arm motif so central to the work (here ingeniously varied to appear in profile), the unfolding motif particularly associated with the fugal entrances, and then the motif where the arms are curved singly or doubly overhead (Figure 4 and a variation).

The coda to the work reviews several of the choreographic elements, mostly delivered in sequential form as the corps imitates the two leads. The gesture in Figures 3 and 4 are very important. So are the swinging turns from the position suggested in Figure 6 which were so prominent in the concluding variations of the passacaglia. The choreographic climax comes when the dancers move in four separately choreographed groups from a teetering variation on Figure 4 to a slow fall into the tense floor position of Figure 8.

Then the leads quietly rise and turn to face the rest of the dancers, saluting them in a suggestion of an elegant courtly bow as Bach's music thunders into its final chords.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

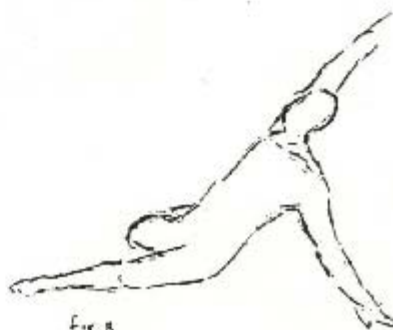


Fig. 8