

Chaconne and Passacaille The *chaconne* (Sp., *chacona*; It., *ciaccona*; Eng., chacon) and *passacaille* (Sp., *pasacalle*, *passacalle*; It., *passacaglia*, *passacaglio*) were two dances in triple meter that developed independently in the early seventeenth century but that both evolved into extended compositions based on continuous variation over a ground, or *ostinato*. As dances, both reached the height of their development in French operas of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Of the two, the *chaconne* has a longer history as a dance, spanning two hundred years, from the late sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, whereas the *passacaille* developed later and declined in popularity sooner. As performed in France, both were primarily, if not exclusively, theatrical dances and were among the most difficult of their period because of the virtuosic technique required of the dancers and the stamina needed for these longest of Baroque dances.

The earliest references to the *chacona* are found in Spanish literary sources starting from 1598, which reveal that at this time the *chacona* was a wild, erotic dance of popular character. It probably originated in the New World, as both the writings about the *chacona* and the texts sung to *chacona* music suggest. There has been considerable speculation about the origin of the name of the dance, with various theories ascribing its derivation to proper nouns (such as the Indians of Chaco, Argentina), to words meaning “beautiful” or “country song,” to verbal imitations of castanets, or to the Italian word for a blind man (*cieco*), but none has been substantiated.

The *chacona* texts, of which fifteen survive in Spanish, exude a spirit of humor, irreverence, and sensuality. Most of the refrains refer to the good life (*la vida bona*). The lascivious character of the *chacona*, which it held in common with the *zarabanda* (in the earliest literary references the two dances are generally mentioned together), led to its being banned from the theater in 1615. The ban seems to have had little effect, as references to the *chacona* continue for the next several decades. However, by 1635 it was being referred to as an old dance.

Nothing specific is known about the choreography of the *chacona* beyond its openly sexual character. A description from Miguel de Cervantes suggests that it was open to any number of couples. The *chacona* was both a social and a theatrical dance, and was performed to the accompaniment of a sung text, a guitar, and percussion instruments such as castanets and the tambourine.

The *chacona* was introduced very early in the seventeenth century from Spain into Italy, where once again it was condemned for its lascivious movements and its corrupting influence. The first musical examples of the *ciaccona* and the *passacaglio*, as the names were written in Italian, may be found in Girolamo Montesardo's *Nuova inventione d'intavolatura, per sonare li balletti sopra la chitarra spagniuola* of 1606, an Italian adaptation of Spanish guitar technique. In this work the *ciaccona* was classified as a *balletto*, whereas the *passacaglio* was not a dance at all, but rather a *ritornello*, or little interlude to be played between the stanzas of a song or to introduce a dance. In the numerous guitar books published in both Italy and Spain during the first half of the seventeenth century, and in books of keyboard music starting with Girolamo Frescobaldi's *Secondo libro di toccate* of 1627, both the *ciaccona* and *passacaglio* consisted musically of short harmonic formulas, usually four measures long, which were strung together to create pieces of the desired length, with variations above the formulas presumably improvised by the performer. Very little is known about the actual uses made of the *ciaccona* as a dance beyond the fact that it did appear in theatrical productions from the first half of the century. Richard Hudson has suggested that the dance may have been incorporated into the *commedia dell'arte* as early as 1622, thus beginning a tradition that is in evidence in eighteenth-century *chaconne* choreographies. It is possible that both the Spanish *passacalle* and the Italian *passacaglio* were not danced at all during this period.

The turning point in the history of both dance forms came with their introduction into France in the first decades of the seventeenth century. A *passacalle* by Henri de Bailly, used as an instrumental introduction to a vocal piece with a Spanish text, may be found in *Airs de différents auteurs*,

Cinquiesme livre (1614), and the earliest French instrumental *chaconne* is one by lutenist Nicolas Vallet in his *Secret des Muses* of 1615. During the following years both *chaconnes* and *passacailles* began to appear in lute and keyboard suites by composers such as Ennemond and Denis Gaultier, Jacques Champion de Chambonnières, and Louis Couperin. The earliest known use of the *chaconne* as a dance in France is the “Entrée des Chaconistes Espagnols” from *Le Ballet des Fées de la Forêt de Saint-Germain* (1625), in which both men and women, costumed in the Spanish manner, danced to the music of a guitar.

When the *passacaille* was first used as a dance is not known, but it may not have been until 1682, when Jean-Baptiste Lully composed his first *passacaille* for the stage, for the opera *Persée*. It was, in fact, the Florentine-born Lully (1632–1687) who was responsible for developing both dance types into standard components of French operas. Starting with one of his early ballets in 1658, *chaconnes* appeared in a growing proportion of his stage works, and a *chaconne* or a *passacaille* held a prominent position in each of his last nine operas. In all, Lully wrote seventeen *chaconnes* and four *passacaille* for the stage, all of which were danced.

As seen in Lully's mature works and in the works of other French composers of the period, both the *chaconnes* and *passacailles* were through-composed pieces in triple meter of substantial length (in comparison to the much shorter two-reprise dance types such as the *menuet* and *sarabande*) and were built on a series of continuous variations over an eight-measure harmonic or melodic pattern. Each eight-bar phrase was further broken into two repeated four-measure units. The two dances were differentiated from each other in that the *passacailles* were often in minor keys, usually started on the downbeat of the measure, and, according to numerous French theorists, had a slower tempo. The *chaconnes* were generally in major keys, often started on the second beat of the measure, and had a livelier tempo. Lully often used either a *chaconne* or a *passacaille* as part of the finale of an act, either as the very last number or as part of a closing complex of pieces that frequently included a chorus built on the same musical material. Indications in the scores and librettos of Lully's works show that *chaconnes* and *passacailles* were generally performed by a substantial number of dancers, but reports of operatic performances indicate that, at least on some occasions, soloists alternated with the group as a whole. The roles represented by dancers of *chaconnes* and *passacailles* ranged from the noble to the comic, with characters as diverse as heroes and heroines from classical antiquity, the peoples of Cathay, Harlequins, and dancing giants.

There are fourteen *chaconne* and six *passacaille* choreographies in Feuillet notation dating from the early part of the eighteenth century, some of English origin. Fifteen of the twenty are for a single dancer; the remaining five are for a couple. All the solo *passacaille* choreographies are for a woman, and nine of the eleven solo *chaconne* choreographies are for a man; whether this differentiation in the notations was reflected in actual practice in the eighteenth century is unknown. A special kind of technical ability is demanded by the three choreographed *chaconnes* for Harlequin, which make use of false foot positions and include instructions for gestures with the head, arms, and hat. Although *chaconnes* and *passacailles* were primarily the province of professional dancers, they were occasionally danced by nobles of outstanding balletic ability at court balls.

French composers of stage music after Lully, such as André Campra and Jean-Philippe Rameau, followed their predecessor's practice of using a *passacaille* or, more frequently, a *chaconne* to end an act or even an entire work, particularly in their serious operas. This tradition continued until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, as seen in the fact that three of the operas composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck for Paris in the 1770s end with *chaconnes*. Even Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote both a *chaconne* and a *passacaille* in the ballet music for his *opera seria*, *Idomeneo*, of 1781. However, it was clear by this time that both dances were decidedly old-fashioned, and they did not survive the century.

[For related discussion, see **Ballet Technique, History of**, article on **French Court Dance**.]

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