

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Fall 2017

Prof. Smey

Session 8 (Thurs, Sept 21)

We began class by listening to a few pieces that are based on “loops.” In the second half we also talked about scales, which are covered in [a separate page of HTML notes](#).

Loop-based compositions

Pachelbel Canon, Bach Passacaglia, Purcell’s “When I am Laid in Earth”

We looked at a few new Baroque pieces, with an eye toward their **form**. Generally speaking, form is the way a piece is organized in time – describing a form usually involves identifying the different sections of a piece and the way they function. Taking apart a piece and looking at how it is planned out can add a whole new dimension to our listening experience, as what might otherwise sound like a bunch of undifferentiated blah blah blah is revealed to be a kind of musical story that you can follow.

Perhaps the simplest kind of musical story is the **loop**, in which a composer simply selects some musical material that will repeat itself, over and over. Usually this is a bass line or chord progression. The general strategy is usually to build things on top of the loop which gradually increase in intensity and sophistication over the course of the work.

Pachelbel’s Canon

Our first official quiz piece of the Baroque period is **Pachelbel’s Canon in D**. We looked at how the bass line and chord progression from the *Basso continuo* run on a constant, two-measure loop.

Also, the violin parts follow each other in a *canon*. A canon is an extreme kind of imitation, in which one part echoes another for a long period of time. (So “row, row, row your boat” is a kind of *canon*.) Canon is Latin for “law,” which emphasizes the strictness of this relationship.

So, the first violin is the “leader” in this relationship. Over the course of the piece it slowly introduces new musical ideas. These ideas then spread through the other parts, due to the echoing relationship of the canon.

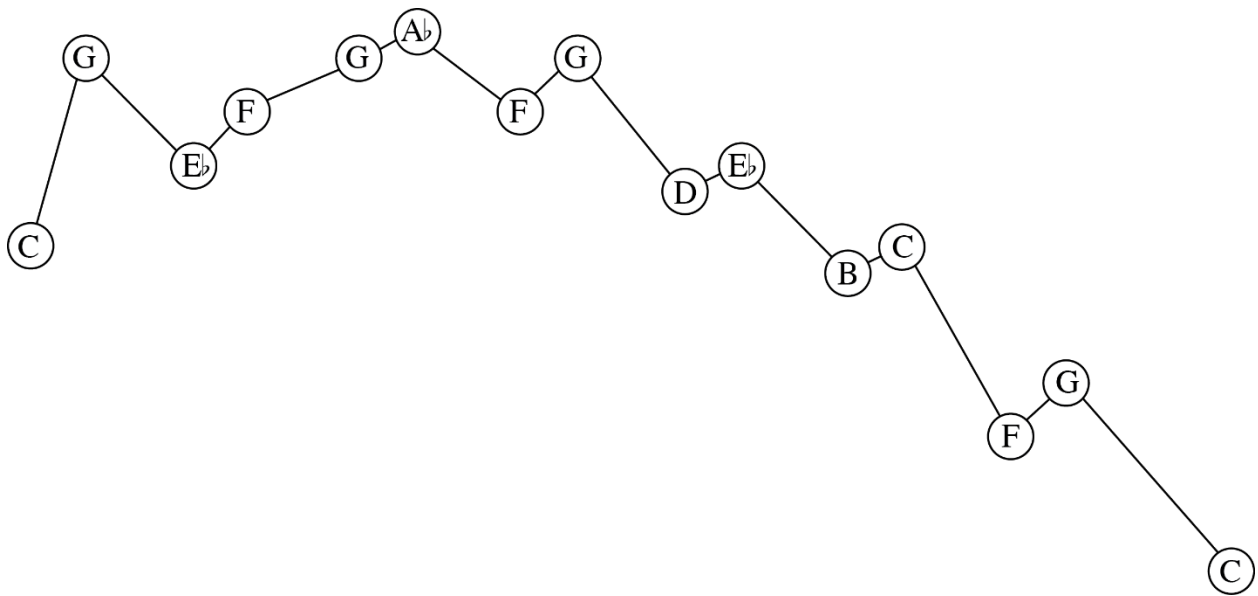


The overall trend in the piece is towards increasingly rich and complex material, though Pachelbel stops building and kind of “fades out” at the end rather than making a big grand finale.

I have [an animated video of the piece](#) which demonstrates all of this.

Bach Passacaglia in C Minor for organ, BWV 582

Next I played a “bonus” loop-based piece, J. S. Bach’s **Passacaglia in C Minor** for organ. This has a fairly long, arch-shaped bass line like this:



We followed a few passes through the bass line and observed the various things Bach does on top. (Also, the bass line occasionally rises to the top of the texture and becomes a melody, and Bach does new things underneath it.) Towards the end he works hard to make the last few loops as intense as possible. This is not a quiz piece.

Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*

Finally, we looked at the aria **"When I am Laid in Earth"** from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*. This also has a looping bass line which I showed in musical notation:



As this falling bass line repeats over and over, Dido's part often makes phrases that intentionally cross over the boundary between the end of one loop and the beginning of the next. She'll start a new idea just as the loop is arriving at its close on the home note. This makes the whole thing sound very fluid and creates nice forward momentum.