

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2017

Prof. Smey

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*

We will do this on **Session 9 (Thurs, March 2)** in the Tues-Thurs classes, and **Session 7/8 (Thurs, March 2)** for the Thursday double class.

Vivaldi's Four Seasons and *ritornello* form

With our Pachelbel and Purcell we looked at a few pieces that are organized as “loops.” This is probably one of the simplest possible ways to build a piece. Now we'll look at a piece that flows a little differently, in what I call “blocks.” (Obviously, both of these terms are my own very informal characterization of what is going on. Today, in more standard terminology, we are really learning about *ritornello form*.)

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is a very popular set of **violin concertos**.

The Concerto

We could define a concerto as an orchestral piece in which a single musician gets to stand apart from the group and play a lot of music. We call this featured musician the **soloist**, and the basic point of the concerto is for this person to “show off” how well they play. Sometimes a concerto actually features two or three soloists.

The word concerto comes from the Italian “concertare,” often translated as “to compete” or “to strive together.” The idea seems to be that the soloist and the larger group are playing a sort of game.

Soloist vs. Tutti

When the soloist is playing, they are usually backed up by just a few musicians. In the course of a typical concerto movement we hear an alternation between some sections that feature the soloist and those that feature the full group.

The full group is often called the **tutti** (Italian for “all”).

Ritornello Form

So, the interplay of soloist and tutti is one way to look at the concerto. A related way is to think about *ritornello form*. A ritornello is simply a chunk of music that returns multiple times. It is usually played by

the tutti. It doesn't have to be exactly the same every time, however – it can be altered in various ways. But the basic idea is that it will be familiar every time it comes back.

(One student in class suggested that it is like the chorus in a pop song. I think that's a pretty good analogy.)

Episodes

The passages between the ritornelli are called *episodes*. This is either space for the soloist to play, or new material for the tutti. Episodes are usually more loose and meandering – they are little musical “adventures” that we embark on between the more stable statements of the *ritornello*.¹

That's really all there is to ritornello form! I made a video for the first movement of the Vivaldi in which the different kind of chunks (ritornelli and episodes) build up on the screen as colored blocks. This is hosted on our website. In the video the *ritornellos* are represented with blue and green blocks, and the white and gray blocks represent the episodes.

The secret story in the Four Seasons

Mapping out the ritornello form is pretty much how you would approach any Vivaldi concerto (of which he wrote more than a hundred). However, the Four Seasons concertos are special because they also tell a little story through tone painting (the depiction of poetic ideas through music.)

It turns out that Vivaldi wrote a little poem over certain parts of the score, indicating what he was trying to represent. In our movement from the “Spring” concerto the episodes for soloist and/or tutti are supposed to represent chirping birds, a babbling brook, and a lightning storm. The book has more details on which parts are supposed to represent which things (pp. 107 in the eighth edition, pp. 117-8 seventh), and our website isolates audio clips of each passage as well.

Note that most Baroque concerti don't represent stories like this. This feature is somewhat unusual for the time period.

¹ A particularly diligent student from Spring 2015 alerted me to the fact that the discussion in the book (pp. 106-7 in the eighth edition, pp. 116-8 seventh edition) never refers to these “in-between parts” as episodes. It is a pretty common practice, though, and it effectively connects *ritornello form* with the *fugue*, which we will discuss next.