

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Summer 2018

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Class 9, Thursday June 28

This was a very full class! We blasted through our two remaining forms, we talked about Beethoven's "Late" Period, and we watched Mozart's *Don Giovanni*.

Theme and Variations

Really, this kind of movement couldn't be more straightforward. One selects a tune and then repeats it over and over, decorating it in a different way each time. The first, relatively simple presentation of the tune is the Theme, and then each subsequent repetition is a Variation.

(It could be argued that this kind of piece evolved out of the looping-bass constructions we saw in the Baroque period. Now instead of a bass line coming back over and over we have an entire tune repeating over and over. The melody gets altered with each pass but certain other aspects of the structure remain intact.)

The only thing that makes a Classic-period Theme and Variations slightly complicated is that the tune tends to have a binary or ternary form, so it will loop through its \parallel : A \parallel : B A \parallel (or what-have-you) pattern every single time. Learning the structure of the tune makes it easier to follow each Variation.

We learned the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, which is a particularly lovely and graceful composition. In the course of his 6 Variations Mozart overhauls the tune in dramatic ways – he changes the key to minor and even alters the meter and tempo from a slow pattern with triple subdivisions to a fast 4/4.

Rondo

I like to say that the Rondo is all about the "happy alternation" of tunes. One puts together a few high-energy melodies and they take turns playing. There are no rules as to what order they will come in, but they tend to make symmetrical patterns like ABACA or ABACABA. One tune (usually the "A" section) will tend to come back most frequently – this is called the *refrain*.

Craig Wright (our textbook author) is emphatic that the Rondo evolved out of the Ritornello Form we saw in the Baroque. (The *ritornello* becomes the *refrain*.) I guess this is plausible. The Rondo is much more organized into neat sections, though.

We looked at the fairly popular finale to Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, which is known as the "Rondo alla Turca." Here the "B" melody turns out to be the most frequent tune. This is a particularly raucous melody with loud, rolling chords underneath – Mozart was actually trying to imitate a Turkish marching band with drums and cymbals!

"Piano Sonata" vs. "Sonata Form"

These new in-class examples come from a very nice Mozart Piano Sonata, No. 11 in A Major. It has three movements, and we looked at the first and last parts.

I. Andante grazioso [Theme and Variations]

II. Menuetto [Minuet and Trio]

III. Alla Turca – Allegretto [Rondo]

One thing that students used to worry about quite a bit is the difference between a "piano sonata" and "sonata form." In Class 15 we looked at *sonata form*, which is a very complex kind of musical story. These are two concepts that are only loosely related!

A piano sonata is just a kind of piece for solo piano with a few different movements in it. One of these movements (usually the first one) is *probably* in sonata form, but maybe not. (Mozart's Sonata No. 11, which we were listening to for this lesson, begins with the Theme and Variations instead.) AND, other kinds of pieces, like string quartets and symphonies, are also likely to start with a movement in sonata form – it's not just for piano sonatas, it happens in every kind of Classic-period piece.

Anyway, now that we are no longer being quizzed on these pieces people are much less anxious about this distinction. 😊

Late Beethoven

From 1810-1827 (or age 40 until his death at 57) Beethoven is thought to have been completely deaf. He has a lot of other health problems and is pretty much completely isolated from society.

During this period he writes a lot of long, strange, and complex piano sonatas and string quartets.

(In Summer 2018 we did a very abbreviated survey of this stuff – I will leave these notes the way I normally have them.)

In class we listened to a bit of his String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131. This is typical of his late works in that it is overstuffed with seven movements, rather than the usual three or four. We listened to his first movement, which is a particularly intense and emotional fugue, and the final movement which is a very aggressive and angry march-like sonata form.

Then we turned to one of the few symphonic works of the late period, his Ninth Symphony which was composed in 1824. At the time of its premiere this was the most massive and unusual symphony ever written – it requires a very large orchestra as well as a full chorus of singers, and it is more than an hour in length.

We touched upon the “spooky” opening of the first movement, the hyperactive and complex second movement, and then jumped to the fourth movement, which is a theme and variations on the well-known “Ode to Joy” melody. Beethoven packs this last movement with all sorts of weird things, including a blast of noise known as the “storm,” a wordless recitative that is “sung” by the low strings, flashbacks to our earlier movements, a Turkish marching band-within-the-band, and, of course, the use of singers.

In general, Beethoven is intentionally disregarding the conventions of the Classic period and following his imagination wherever it wants to go. This makes him sort of a transitional figure into the wilder and more creative Romantic period.

Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*

With Mozart we get the first really mature, mainstream operas that are standard repertory for most opera fans. A lot of the credit actually belongs to one of Mozart’s librettists, Lorenzo da Ponte, who helped him adapt controversial material with a depth and complexity that opera had never seen before. (In class, I compare da Ponte to Shakespeare, because his works give each character some amount of dignity rather than just using stereotypes and caricatures. As a result, you get to see things from all points of view, not just one.)

Mozart wrote 22 operas over the course of his career, though some of these are just short, silly works that he composed as a teenager. His final four works are considered all-time classics and are frequently performed. The first three are in Italian, and written with da Ponte:

Le nozze di Figaro [1786] (The Marriage of Figaro)

Don Giovanni [1787]

Così fan tutte [1790] (So Do They All)

You could call all three of these works “social satires.” His final opera (and one of his final works) is in German and quite different. It takes place in a sort of fantasy world with magic, dragons, bird-people, etc.

Die Zauberflöte [1791] (The Magic Flute)

(...though just below the surface the Magic Flute is actually an allegory about the Freemasons, a somewhat mysterious and controversial organization that Mozart joined in 1784.)

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* [1787]

Don Giovanni is a comic opera – it has some silly situations, a lot of sarcasm and irony, a lower-class character who constantly criticizes his noble master, and it often has the quicker pacing of comedy. However, the subject matter is also very dark – Don Giovanni is a version of the Don Juan character, a powerful man whose main goal in life is to sleep with as many women as he can. He does this through a mixture of sexual assault, deception, and abuse of his powerful position.

(Thus, the opera is similar to the television show *Breaking Bad*, which also treated an essentially unfunny subject with irony and humor. The Don Giovanni/Leporello relationship is even a lot like the Mr. White/Jesse pairing.)

In class we watched an edited-down version of Acts I and II. To get started I gave you a quick list of important characters:

Don Giovanni – he is of course the main character. He is a nobleman who seems to have unlimited leisure time to pursue his sexual agenda.

Leporello – this is the servant / sidekick. He is often off to the side of the action, making jokes.

Donna Anna – this is the woman who Don Giovanni attacks in the very first scene. She and her fiancée actually have a few scenes in the opera, but I have edited most of them out for time. They are supposed to be somewhat “middle class.”

The Commendatore – This is Donna Anna’s father. His title would translate to “Commander” – apparently this was a prestigious rank in Italian society. He rushes out to defend Donna Anna’s honor in the first scene, with dire consequences.

Donna Elvira – We meet Donna Elvira in the middle of Act I. She is an aristocratic woman who had a brief affair with Giovanni, and thinks that they are married. She has come looking for him and disrupts some of his schemes.

Zerlina and Masetto – this a peasant couple who are getting married. Giovanni arrives during the pre-wedding festivities and tries to seduce Zerlina.

Every time we watch this I am struck by how well the music serves the drama, and how relevant this work is to our contemporary world. Don Giovanni’s time apparently has no police or media, but aside from that things seem almost the same.