

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 10 – Tuesday, March 6

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* concerto

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”).

So, the interplay of soloist and tutti is one way to look at this concerto. These are very general concepts that apply to every concerto.

Ritornello Form

Our movement from the “Spring” concerto is also organized in *ritornello form*. This is a method for building a piece of music that was popular in the Baroque. 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 it returns, 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. 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 a movement from 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 stream or river, a lightning storm, and then the birds re-emerging after the 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.

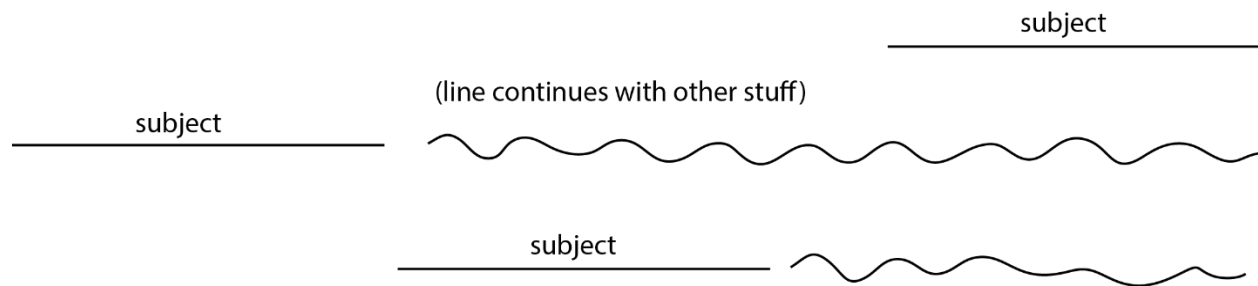
Note that most Baroque concerti don't represent stories like this. This feature is somewhat unique to the Four Seasons.

Bach's “Little” Fugue in G Minor

Our next work from the Baroque period is a Fugue, which I described as “the ultimate polyphonic piece.” A fugue features multiple lines (which we like to call “voices,” even though nobody is singing) that combine in a complex web of music.

It is organized around a frequently repeated melody called a *subject*. The subject is introduced at the very beginning of the piece in a single, unaccompanied voice. Additional voices then enter, one at a time, also leading with the subject, like so:

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.



This opening sequence, in which each voice presents the subject, is called the *exposition*.

After the exposition we get more statements of the subject separated by *episodes*. Episodes are our in-between, connective parts which tend to be looser and more exploratory. Often they are based on little fragments taken from the subject.

Thus, the fugue is a lot like ritornello form – instead of ritornellos it has statements of the subject. Both forms have relatively stable areas of music that are characterized by instantly recognizable material, but the fugue subjects are a little more complicated and the boundaries between the subject and episodes is more fluid, less “chunky.” In both forms the more stable and familiar parts are connected by the looser episodes.

The Well-Tempered Clavier

Next we considered one of Johann Sebastian Bach’s great masterworks, a collection of 48 Preludes and Fugues called *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

A Prelude is simply a kind of introductory piece. It is supposed to get us used to the sound of the scale we are working with. This sets the stage for the more elaborate fugue, which is the same kind of polyphonic exploration of subject and episodes we talked about earlier.

Bach wrote a Prelude and Fugue for every possible key. There are 12 possible major keys and 12 possible minor keys, so that makes 24 sets, and he went through the cycle twice, generating a total of 48 pairs. We listened to a performance of the Prelude and Fugue in G major from Book I, and compared it to the Prelude and Fugue in G minor from Book I. Each key has its own personality – the G major sounds light, fast, and complex, while the G minor is at first very thoughtful (in the prelude) and then stern and almost angry (in the fugue.)

Here are youtube links if you missed it or want to rehear.

[J. S. Bach, Prelude and Fugue in G Major from WTC Book I](#) (Sviatoslav Richter playing, shows the sheet music)

[J. S. Bach, Prelude and Fugue in G Minor from WTC Book I](#) (Joanna MacGregor playing)

Why is it called The “Well-Tempered Clavier”

Clavier = Keyboard Instrument

The term “Clavier” in the title is just a generic term meaning “keyboard instrument.” We looked at the main keyboard options Bach would have had in his lifetime – the harpsichord and a little box-shaped instrument called the clavichord. The piano was not invented yet, but these days it is considered perfectly appropriate to play the Well-Tempered Clavier on a modern piano.

Well-Tempered = Well-Tuned

The “Well-Tempered” part of the title refers to a surprising problem in music – the various scales do not mesh together perfectly. If we take an instrument and tune it so that a single scale (like, say, C major) sounds as good as it possibly can sound, this will cause other scales (like, say, A-flat major) to sound out of tune. The art of tuning the keyboard so that all scales are in a compromise that sounds reasonably good was called “finding the temperament,” and it took several centuries to perfect this practice. (Now that we have electronic tuners and know how to do logarithms it is easy to break an octave into 12 perfectly equal parts, but they didn’t have that technology back then!)

Thus, if you can play all the way through Bach’s volumes and every piece sounds good, you know that your keyboard instrument is “well-tempered.”

On the quiz...

You want to know about how the WTC is an anthology of 48 Preludes and Fugues in every possible key and also what the words “well-tempered clavier” mean