

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Fall 2017

Prof. David Smey

Session 16 – Tuesday, Oct 24

In this class we blasted through our two remaining forms. These are a lot easier to deal with than Sonata Form, so it was actually pretty quick and straightforward. We learned about the Theme and Variations, and Rondo.

Then, at the end, we discussed Beethoven's "Middle Period"

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 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. 😊

Beethoven Part II – The "Middle" Period

Perhaps the most well-known fact about Beethoven is that he eventually loses his sense of hearing. He notices his increasing deafness around age 30, and this is (quite understandably) a traumatic event for him.

In class we'll watch some documentary footage about Beethoven's temporary retreat from society, during which he writes the famous "Heiligenstadt Testament," a letter which describes

his deep humiliation, thoughts of suicide, and eventual resolve to do all he can to make the most of his career as a composer.

After he emerges from isolation he writes new works that surpass anything that had ever been done before. These pieces have some interesting new qualities.

The interest in “Heroism”

The political climate in Europe at this time was quite unstable – the French Revolution was over and Napoleon was conquering new territory in a series of wars with other European nations. Beethoven thought that this was an exciting development that would upend the traditional rule of the aristocracy and transform society. He became obsessed with military action and the concept of heroism. (Later, however, he became disillusioned with his hero after Napoleon declared himself to be an Emperor. He originally dedicated his Third Symphony to him but then crossed out the name on the title page.)

Also, it seems plausible that Beethoven views himself as a sort of hero in this period, as he battles against his encroaching deafness to create revolutionary new music.

Thus, the pieces of this period often have a new hopefulness, rhythmic energy, and militaristic vibe.

Symphony No. 3 (nicknamed the “Eroica”)

This is one of the first works of the middle period and perhaps Beethoven’s first truly revolutionary symphony. Immediately, the first movement of this symphony sounds like we are in the midst of a battle, with hard-charging rhythms in the strings, horn calls in the winds, and a general sense of wandering or modulation that suggests instability. This is the longest, loudest, and most complex symphony anyone had heard at the time, and there are many ways in which the first movement is a technical advancement in sonata form.

Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 “Waldstein”

This piano sonata is another work that features hard-charging rhythms and an immediate plunge into a “searching” or “wandering” modulation.

Organicism

Another new trend in the middle period is the organization of large works around tiny ideas. In music, a short idea that gets repeated and manipulated in interesting ways is called a *motive*. Beethoven starts to build works in which virtually every musical idea is derived from a very simple motive – thus, the whole work seems to grow “organically” out of one “seed.” Composers who followed Beethoven found this to be a very exciting concept.

Symphony No. 5

The Fifth Symphony is of course Beethoven's most famous and familiar work – virtually everyone knows that it starts with the very striking “buh-buh-buh-BUUUM” motive. (Beethoven apparently told his one of his assistants that this represented “fate knocking at the door.”)

What you may not have realized is that the entire symphony is permeated with hundreds of copies of this idea. The first movement builds an entire sonata form out of it, and then our slow movement, minuet and trio, and high-energy finale all use it as well.

In class I play parts of all four movements and point out as many instances of the motive as I can.