

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2019

Prof. Smey

Class 9 – Thursday Feb 28

In this class we looked at some pieces which are built in “blocks” and we took one last deep dive into the world of music theory.

Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* concerto

With our Pachelbel and Purcell we are studying 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*.)

The Concerto

Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* is a very popular set of **violin concertos**. 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 in the course of a movement. It is usually played by the tutti. It doesn’t have to be exactly the same every time it comes back, however – it can be altered in various ways. But the basic concept is that it will be familiar every time, like we are revisiting the main idea.

(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.

Triads and Chord Progressions

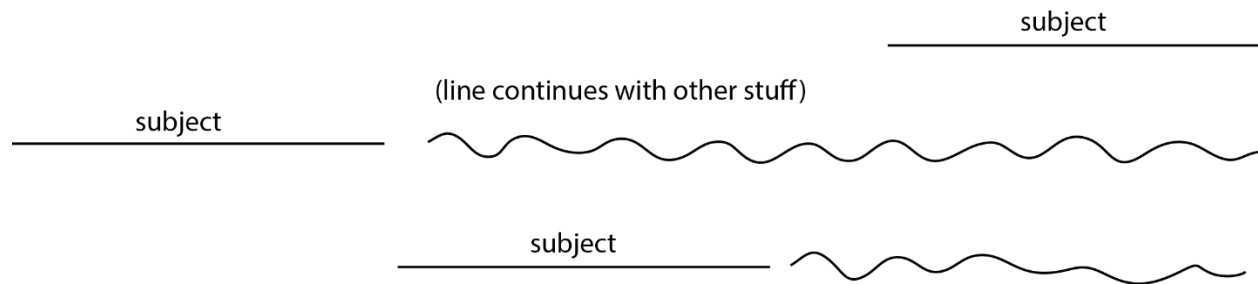
Next, we talked about some more basic building blocks of music, the major and minor triads. I showed you how to derive triads from a scale and some of the different things composers do with them. I have [HTML notes](#) on all of this.

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.

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.

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:



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.