

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization Spring 2019

Prof. Smey

Class 10 – Tuesday, March 5

The Well-Tempered Clavier

We started class by considering 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 that we talked about in the previous class.

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 (for Book I and Book II), 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."

The Baroque Dance Suite

Our exploration of Baroque Period pieces has mostly been organized according to their **form**, the way they are organized and the musical story that they tell. Up to now we've looked at some pieces that are built in "loops," and some that I claim are built in "blocks" or "chunks." It's time to look at one last kind of Baroque piece, which has a slightly different feeling than our somewhat serious and complicated violin concerto and fugue.

This is the Baroque Dance Suite, which is simply a short collection of different dance-type movements. We think that these are "**stylized**" dances, meaning that they were intended more for listening and not for social dancing.

We listened to a set of Bourrées from Bach's Suite No. 3 in C major for Solo Cello, BWV 1009. The suite has six movements overall, and we are picking the fifth one. Each one of these would have its own distinctive style and "groove."

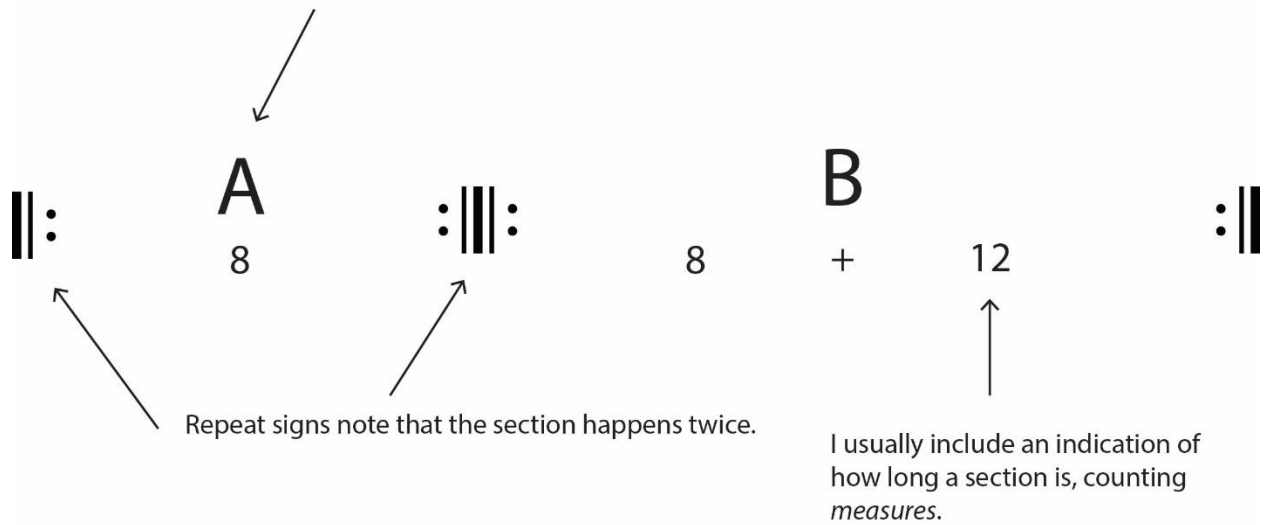
- I. Prelude
- II. Allemande
- III. Courante
- IV. Sarabande
- V. Bourrées I & II
- VI. Gigue

These dance movements seem a little more organized and compact than the other kinds of pieces we've looked at in this unit. Our loop-based compositions as well as our ritornello forms and fugues all seem to flow out rather loosely – they are made of a lot of little parts strung together. A composer could easily insert even more material into the middle of these works and it wouldn't really mess up the form in any way.

Baroque dance movements, on the other hand, tend to have a fixed plan – they are divided into two sections that repeat.

In order to follow this structure I we will use a new kind of formal map for this piece, with a new vocabulary that we are going to see more in the future. It just has a few different elements.

Letters and other symbols keep track of the different sections.



So, here we've got two sections, each of which are repeated. The first one is usually pretty short and straightforward, and the second part tends to be a little longer and wilder. (My sample diagram above is our Bourrée I, where the first part is 8 measures long but the second part is a total of 20 measures.)

In general there are two versions of this basic structure which are called **Binary Form** and **Ternary Form**. The only difference between the two, really, is whether the "A" material makes a return appearance at the end. If it does, it is a Ternary form (because the A-B-A makes three parts). If it does not, and the second half of the piece is completely different, it is Binary (= A-B, two parts).

Here are sample Binary and Ternary Forms.

Binary Form



Ternary Form



So, our Bourrées are in binary form. In addition, there's one more complication. There are two of them, and they alternate in their own A B A pattern.

Bourrée I



Bourrée II



Bourrée I



I've made [a video of this movement](#), which is hosted on our website. It features an animated version of our form diagram which you can follow, as well as some fun choreography from the Mark Morris Dance Group.

In general, you want to remember:

- These Bourrées are in *binary form*. Two parts A + B, first one is short, second one longer, both sections get repeated.
- They are part of a Baroque Dance Suite, a set of *stylized dances*
- The middle dance (Bourrée II) is more "flowing" and in a minor key. On the quiz I may play Bourrée II by itself, and I'll ask you whether the part we are hearing is based on the major or minor scale.