

**MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization    Spring 2019**

**Prof. David Smey**

**Class 16, Tuesday March 25**

In this session we went through our final two Classic-period forms and talked about Beethoven's Early Period.

## **The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

The life of Beethoven is traditionally told in three parts. In this session we'll discuss the first part, "Early Beethoven."

Beethoven is born in Bonn, Germany, and he moves to Vienna at the age of 21. I like to describe him at this time as a sort of "rock star." He was making original new music with a new intensity that a certain circle of Viennese found very exciting, and on a personal level he was also somewhat stylish, brooding, and mysterious.

During this period he mostly wrote music for the piano, which he would perform himself. We will listen to a few parts from his famous piano sonatas, the "Moonlight" and the "Pathetique."

This early period lasts until age 30, when he first starts to realize he is going deaf. This creates a major crisis for Beethoven and he withdraws from society for a few years. When he comes back his music is different! We'll talk about this middle period in the near future.

### **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.

In class we listened to Mozart's set of variations on "Ah! vous dirai-je, maman" (what we would call "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.") Since the tune is so familiar it was easy to follow the structure of each variation as it unfolded.

On our blog I've also got an animated analysis of 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"

Some of our examples in this unit 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.

*Sonata form* is a way of structuring a movement as a sort of “argument.” It has an exposition, development, and recapitulation, with all sorts of things going in in each section.

The first movement of a piano sonata is *probably* in sonata form, but maybe not. Also, the last movement is sometimes a sonata form. Other kinds of Classic-period pieces, like string quartets and symphonies, are also likely to have sonata forms in these same positions, in their first and last movements.

However, there are other possibilities. Mozart’s Sonata No. 11, which we were listening to for this lesson, begins with the Theme and Variations instead.

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