

RONDO FORM

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Podcast #10

Hello. This is the tenth in a series of podcasts dealing with different elements of music composition. Today our topic is rondo. When I first began researching the background of this form I was puzzled by something. I knew the definition used by many music teachers, namely that a piece which uses rondo form alternates a recurring A section with sections of new material (B, C, etc.). By this definition a typical rondo might go ABACA with each section about the same length. This is all very clear and straightforward. My problem was that none of the pieces I knew which were actually called Rondo quite fit this format. They had a recurring section, but it wasn't always the same length in each repetition nor were the other sections always of equal duration. In addition, the structure wasn't a simple ABACA. As it turns out, the Baroque-era form, spelled *rondeau* and used mainly by French harpsichord composers who based it on a poetic form, does follow ABACA structure. The Classical-era and later form, spelled *rondo* and used mainly in the final movements of symphonies and concerti by composers like Mozart and Beethoven, is much less well-defined. Sometimes movements repeat the entire A section, sometimes only part. Sometimes they also feature development of the theme, a hybrid form called *sonata-rondo* or *rondo-sonata* form. The more research I did the more I realized that composers altered the formal characteristics of a rondo to fit their needs at the time, making it a much more flexible structure historically than I had formerly believed.

To clarify things let's examine an example, the *Romanza* from Mozart's *Serenade #13* for Strings, the famous *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, or *A Little Night Music*. I'm indebted to Mike Capistrano who uses this movement on his website to illustrate this very form. Mr. Capistrano simplifies it by leaving out the second theme, but it is precisely this second theme which differentiates this piece and other Classical-era rondo movements from earlier examples. Instead of a simple ABACA form what we have in this case goes like this: the A section is divided into two eight-bar sections of 4/4, each repeated. So in A we have two themes; I'll call them little a and little a'. Thus the opening of the piece, the rondo or capital A section, is 32 bars long. Here's the little a section (PLAY OPENING SECTION 1X; FIRST 27"). It makes a very clear melodic statement with simple harmonic accompaniment. Now here's little a' (PLAY 56"-1'23"). One of the tricks of writing successfully in this form is to provide both contrast and continuity in the interludes between entrances of the main theme. We need contrast to maintain interest and continuity to reassure the listener that this is all the same piece. Let's listen to the second (or B) section now (PLAY 1'53"-2'51"). Perhaps you may have noticed that B isn't as long as A. That's due to the fact that even with some repetition of material the main theme of B is 12 bars long. Mozart then follows with a new idea which transitions back to A (PLAY FINAL 6 BARS OF B: 2'38"-2'51"). This means the entire length of B is 18 bars or 14 bars shorter than A.

We then get a return to A, but only the first theme for 8 bars. Then comes a real change to minor with a more agitated theme. (PLAY C 3' 21"-4'10") This 16-bar C section is followed by a return to A for the final time. This time Mozart plays each A theme once. Finally we get an 8-bar coda to finish off. So the overall form is ABACA coda but without the equal length of all sections which the lettering implies. Let's listen to the final section and coda. (PLAY 4'11" - END OF MOVEMENT)

It doesn't take a mathematician to realize that this is not a symmetrical piece. The opening section is by far the longest at 32 bars. The second section is an unusual 18 bars while the third (the Rondo played the second time) is only 8 bars long. The final two sections are 16 bars long apiece and there follows an 8-bar coda. Another facet to note is that each section begins not on the downbeat, but with two pickup beats. And yet for all the mathematic asymmetry the piece sounds smooth and beautifully proportioned. It's a wonderful example of a composer tailoring a form to meet his or her

needs.

Even though we won't have time to examine them I have two other very interesting examples of rondo form to bring to your attention. The first is the final movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A K.331. This movement is called Rondo a la Turk and features a Turkish march, a very popular type of music in Vienna in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The second example is a takeoff on the first. It's called "Blue Rondo a la Turk" and was written by Dave Brubeck for the album "Time Out" which also features the more famous "Take Five". In "Blue Rondo a la Turk" Brubeck alternates sections using an actual Turkish rhythmic pattern in 9/8 (divided 2+2+2+3) with a 12-bar blues.

These two examples are well worth checking out. Along with the Romanza we heard a few minutes ago they illustrate that using a specific form, whether it be rondo or something else, isn't painting by numbers. It is important that you make the form your own. I've seen student work which is a hybrid of rondo and theme and variations. As long as the work is successful in other ways, why not? I'd rather see an exciting piece of music which uses a form in an individual manner than a piece which follows the structural format exactly but is less successful musically. So don't be afraid to experiment with rondo and other forms to get them to suit your needs. If Mozart and Brubeck can do it, why not you? Next time our topic will be 12-bar blues. I hope you can join me.