

Piece 7: 'Canon' or two-part canons based on a harmonic progression

A canon is a polyphonic play of *proposta* and *riposta*. In a two-part canon one voice (*proposta*, *dux*, leader) starts a melody that is imitated by a second voice (*riposta*, *comes*, follower) after a given duration (e.g. whole rest, half rest, quarter rest etc.). The entry of the *riposta* is before the *proposta* has finished. So overlapping is the result.

'Canon' (piece 7) from 'Fantasia' of Oscar van Hemel (1892–1981) is a work that investigates canon techniques within the framework of a ternary form A–B–A.

The *proposta* of the canon of Section A (G major) is the upper voice. In Section B (E minor) the lower voice is the *proposta*. Both sections have canons at the unison. The canons are more or less strict.

A nice educational feature is the complementary rhythm: if one voice has activity, the other voice has a long note. Both voices can be easily distinguished from each other.

The easiest way to write a canon is by defining a harmonic progression and then selecting notes creatively. Van Hemel shows how to do that.

1. Canon of Section A

Step 1: the harmonic progression of section A

The canon of section A is based on the authentic cadence I–V–I or T–D–T

Example 1a: antecedent section A

I
V7
I
T
D
T

This harmonic progression shows two different chords, which have only one note in common: note D. In order to preserve a basic tonal organization, we have to use this common note when the *proposta* have notes from V (D) and the *riposta* from I (T) and vice versa.

Step 2: the canon structure

The structure of Van Hemel's canon (bar 1–4) can be shown in the following diagram:

T – T – T – T – D – D – D – T	(<i>proposta</i>)
T – T – T – T – D – D – D – T	(<i>riposta</i>)

Each T or D has the duration of a half note. The *proposta* starts as a solo voice, playing with one or more notes of T as main notes (of course these main tones can be elaborated by neighbour tones or passing tones etc.). After the duration of a half note, the *riposta* imitates the *proposta* exactly. Only in two cases we have to put attention to the harmony: where T and D coincide, we have to use the common notes as main tones. As already explained, the harmonic progression provides only one common note: note D.

Step 3: the basic canon

Let us work out the above diagram.

Example 1b: harmonic base canon, antecedent section A

Proposta

Riposta

T T T D D D T T

The only thing we have to do is to make a melody for the proposta based on the the notes of T and D. The riposta is a copy of the proposta.

Note that register is not important: the note G one-line octave or G three-line octave represent both T!

Example 1c: basic canon, antecedent section A, main tones

Proposta

Riposta

T T T D D D T T

Now we can elaborate this 'melody' with embellishing notes. This is left to the reader.

Van Hemel's selection of main tones is as follows (it can be seen as a second application of example 1b):

Example 1d: basic canon Van Hemel, antecedent section A, main tones

Proposta

Riposta

T T T D D D T T

Of course, Van Hemel elaborate this 'melody' to let it fit to his musical needs.

Example 1e: final version canon Van Hemel, antecedent section A

Musical score for Example 1e. The top staff is labeled 'Proposta' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Riposta'. Both are in G major and common time. The Proposta part consists of a series of eighth-note runs. The Riposta part consists of a series of eighth-note runs. Below the staves is a rhythm diagram with two rows of letters: 'T' and 'D'. The first row contains: T, T, T, D, D, D, T, T. The second row contains: T, T, T, T, D, D, D, T.

Of course, other embellishing choices are possible.

Van Hemel's consequent is based on the same framework. Van Hemel selected other main tones in the third bar. The last bar is free.

Example 1f: basic canon Van Hemel, consequent section A, main tones

Musical score for Example 1f. The top staff is labeled 'Proposta' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Riposta'. Both are in G major and common time. The Proposta part consists of a series of quarter notes. The Riposta part consists of a series of quarter notes. Below the staves is a rhythm diagram with two rows of letters: 'T' and 'D'. The first row contains: T, T, T, D, D, D. The second row contains: T, T, T, T, D, D.

Example 1g: final version canon Van Hemel, consequent section A

Musical score for Example 1g. The top staff is labeled 'Proposta' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Riposta'. Both are in G major and common time. The Proposta part consists of a series of eighth-note runs. The Riposta part consists of a series of eighth-note runs. Below the staves is a rhythm diagram with two rows of letters: 'T' and 'D'. The first row contains: T, T, T, D, D, D. The second row contains: T, T, T, T, D, D.

2. Canon of Section B

Step 1: the harmonic progression of section B

The canon of the antecedent of section B is based on the half cadence I-II-V or T-S-D

Example 2a: antecedent section B

The musical notation shows a half cadence progression in G major. The first measure is a tonic triad (I) with notes G, B, and D. The second measure is a supertonic triad in second inversion (II65) with notes B, D, and G. The third measure is a dominant triad (V) with notes G, B, and D. The bass line consists of a single note G in each measure.

Three different chords with note E as common note between T and S and note F# as common note between S and D. This means that our canon design is more complicated.

Step 2: the canon structure

Example 2b: harmonic base canon, antecedent section B

The musical notation shows a harmonic base canon in G major. The Riposta part (treble clef) starts with a whole rest in the first measure, followed by chords in the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth measures. The Proposta part (bass clef) starts with a chord in the first measure, followed by chords in the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth measures. The chord labels below the Proposta part are: T, T, T, T, T, S, S, S, D.

Step 3: from basic canon to final version

Example 3a: basic canon Van Hemel, antecedent section B, main tones

The musical notation shows a basic canon in G major. The Riposta part (treble clef) starts with a whole rest in the first measure, followed by notes in the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth measures. The Proposta part (bass clef) starts with a note in the first measure, followed by notes in the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth measures. The chord labels below the Proposta part are: T, T, T, T, T, S, S, S, D.

The final version of the antecedent of section B is an elaboration of this framework.

Example 3b: final version canon Van Hemel, antecedent section B

Riposta

Proposta

T T T T S S S S D

The consequent of Section B is based on the same harmonic framework (example 2b). Van Hemel selected other main tones in the third bar. The last bar is free.

Example 3c: basic canon Van Hemel, consequent section B, main tones

Riposta

Proposta

T T T T S S S S D

Example 3d: final version canon Van Hemel, consequent section B

Riposta

Proposta

T T T T S S

3. Final version Canon Van Hemel

We assemble all the antecedents and consequents, we presented above, adding dynamics and phrasing. The result is a ternary form A-B-A, with each section composed as a canon.

Allegretto

p

p

p

p

p

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard, psychologist, software engineer, organist and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music writing, music theory and music history). Maliepaard is the developer and maintainer of www.bestmusicteacher.com, that has three objectives education – information – inspiration
This article has been typeset with his free/open source music notation program MC Musiceditor 8.1.1, that can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com.
