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

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:

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T – T – T – T – D – D – D – T          (proposta)
    T – T – T – T – D – D – D – T      (riposta)
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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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Step 3: from basic canon to final version

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

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

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

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

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.

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