

CHAPTER FIVE

IMITATION AND CANON

Unity in music is achieved through various approaches to the concept of repetition. We have seen how sequences can provide unity by way of the transposed repetition of a series of notes. While sequences involve some form of repetition in the same part, Imitation is the repetition of a passage by another voice – the other part in two-part counterpoint. Imitation and Sequence are the two most powerfully unifying procedures in Baroque music – and Bach's writings in particular. They play a vital role in all pieces of the period and are especially evident in the Inventions and Fugues.

THE INTERVAL OF IMITATION. The most common interval of imitation is the octave, as seen in Example A:

IMITATION AT THE OCTAVE BELOW Imitation AT THE OCTAVE ABOVE

(A)

Key of C Key of G

In fact, however, imitation might occur at any – usually diatonic – interval. Next to the octave, the 5th and 4th are the most often used (Example B below):

IMITATION AT THE 5TH Imitation AT THE 4TH

(B)

Key of F Key of C

Some other intervals of imitation are seen in Example C:

(C)

Key of C Key of am

FRENCH SUITE NO. 4

Key of Eb

Octave imitation starts here

Detailed description: This musical score is for French Suite No. 4 in E-flat major, 3/4 time. It features a treble and bass staff. The treble staff begins with a melodic line: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. An annotation 'tr' is placed above the first measure of the treble staff. A bracket labeled 'Octave imitation starts here' spans from the third measure of the treble staff to the third measure of the bass staff, where the bass staff begins with a melodic line an octave below the treble staff's starting point.

FRENCH SUITE NO. 6

Key of E

Detailed description: This musical score is for French Suite No. 6 in E major, 6/8 time. It features a treble and bass staff. The treble staff begins with a melodic line: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. The key signature is E major, and the time signature is 6/8.

Such examples could go on indefinitely. Imitation at the octave may occur anywhere in a piece. All manner of variety is found in terms of the length of the imitation and the metrical distance between the first note of the “leader” and the first note of the “follower” (these terms will be used in the discussion of Canon, which follows shortly).

The excerpts below (Example B) are also from Bach; they demonstrate the process of imitation at the 4th or 5th – the next most common intervals of imitation after the octave:

FRENCH SUITE NO. 3

(B)

Key of bm

Detailed description: This musical score is for French Suite No. 3 in B major, 3/4 time. It features a treble and bass staff. The treble staff begins with a melodic line: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The bass staff provides a harmonic accompaniment. A circled letter 'B' is placed at the beginning of the treble staff. The key signature is B major, and the time signature is 3/4.

FRENCH SUITE NO. 4

Key of Eb

INVENTION NO. 10

Key of G

Notice how, in the G Major example above, Bach slips from imitation at the 4th to imitation at the 5th. The change takes place where the top part leaps an octave, whereas the bottom part leaps up only a 7th (to the dominant 7th), widening the interval of imitation by a step from a 4th to a 5th. These kinds of maneuvers are common in his music. The examples given above are mere drops in an ocean of similar examples we could find in Bach. The use of sequence and imitation form the backbone of contrapuntally written compositions.

IMITATION IN CONTRARY MOTION. All of the excerpts thus far show imitation where the following voice maintains an identical melodic contour to the leading voice. Imitation in contrary motion allows the follower to proceed in the opposite direction from the leader—general interval for general interval. Example C demonstrates:

Imitates bottom part in contrary motion

Example C above is taken from Bach's Fugue No.4 in D Minor from Book 1 of the Well Tempered Klavier. Example D shows a most unusual approach to imitation in contrary motion, where the follower appears only one half of a beat after the leader (!), producing a highly syncopated result. The excerpt is from the Invention No. 6 in E Major. This relationship is repeated several times during this work.

Imitation in contrary motion

Actual imitation in contrary motion is relatively rare in the style, but the concept of contrary motion in itself is extremely important and is found significantly throughout Bach's works. Once a musical statement is established and impressed upon the ear of the listener, it can be used later in the musical discourse in its mirrored form—in contrary motion. The mirrored form may begin on any desired pitch. A simple and clear example is the principal motive of the C Major Invention, which Bach uses in its mirrored form just about as often as the original (Example E). Other instances from Bach follow (Examples F, G, H):

Original form Contrary motion later

Key of C

INVENTION NO. 11

Original form Contary motion later

Key of gm

THREE-PART INVENTION NO. 6

Original form Contary motion later

Key of E

We have been dealing in this chapter with the extremely important concept of imitation, but you have received no instruction as to how to write music containing imitation, strict or otherwise. The most coherent method of instruction in this regard is the study of Canon, which fully deserves its own chapter. If you can master the writing of canons, you will have little trouble with imitation in general. However, be sure to review thoroughly the material in this chapter before moving ahead to Chapter Six.