

Canons

(Johann Sebastian Bach)

Canons

- ▶ Canons are the strictest form of imitative counterpoint, with one voice followed shortly by another repeating the same notes exactly
- ▶ The first voice is referred to as the leader (*dux*) and the imitating voice as the follower (*comes*)
- ▶ Canons can be defined by:
 - ▶ The interval of imitation that they use
 - ▶ The amount of time between entries
- ▶ For example, a canon might feature imitation at the fifth after a time interval of one measure

A few notes on canons

- ▶ Canonic imitation most often occurs at the octave (above or below) or at the fifth (above)
- ▶ Canons at the tenth, at the unison, and at the sixth are also fairly common
- ▶ Canons at 1 or 2 measures are the most common
- ▶ Canons sometimes break off just before a cadence in order to present free cadential material
- ▶ Two-voice canons may feature a third, non-canonic voice to fill in harmonies or to act as a bass line
- ▶ *Rounds* are very simple vocal canons with imitation at the octave or unison

Puzzle Canons

- ▶ Since the follower is the same as the leader, composers did not usually notate the second canonic voice—instead they indicated where the second voice should start, and at what interval it should start above or below the first voice
- ▶ If the composer does not indicate where or on what pitch the second voice should come in, then the result is a *puzzle canon*—it is left up to the musicians to figure out how to make the second voice fit—this was a popular pastime among musicians in the 17th and 18th centuries

Bach's *A Musical Offering*

- ▶ Some of the canons from Bach's *A Musical Offering* are puzzle canons
- ▶ These canons are based on a theme which was given to Bach by King Frederick the Great (who himself played it for Bach on the keyboard)
- ▶ Bach improvised a fugue and some canons for the King on the spot (hoping to get a job from him)
- ▶ Later he worked out the theme in several new ways, sending the King a copy of ten canons, a six voice setting, a three-voice fugue and a complete trio sonata based on the King's theme

Special canons

- ▶ Several of the canons in *A Musical Offering* are "special canons"—more than simple imitation
- ▶ A canon that can continue indefinitely is called a *perpetual canon*—often it is left up to the performer to find a good place to end it
- ▶ If the follower is an inverted version of the leader, the result is a *canon per motum contrarium* (or a canon by contrary motion)
- ▶ In a canon by augmentation or diminution the second voice moves at a different speed

Special canons

- ▶ In a *modulating canon*, the canon modulates to a new key at each repetition
- ▶ In a retrograde canon (or *crab canon*) the follower is a retrograde (backward) version of the leader
- ▶ A *table canon* is the same sheet of music read by two players from opposite sides of the same table, such that one player is reading the retrograde inversion of the other player's part
- ▶ In a *double canon*, two separate themes are treated simultaneously in canon

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