

Canon

Color 9 minutes 13 seconds
Produced by The National Film Board of Canada

A Norman McLaren film that puts visuals, color, animation, and sound *together* in meaningful patterns to illustrate the structure of simple musical rounds and a more complex musical canon.

Class preparation

Students should have experience with the following:
Round Singing
Theme and Melody Identification
Basic Instrumental Sounds

Correlations

Art, Dance, Self-expression

Helpful musical terms

Theme

Melody

Solo

Imitation

Voices or Parts

(2-part, 3-part, 4-part)
(2-voice, 3-voice, 4-voice)

Harmony

Rhythm

Pitch

Unison

Octave
(Intervals)

Registers

(of voices and instruments)

Variations

(types of variations
used in complex canons)

Diminution

(a melody diminished in
time, or played faster)

Augmentation

(a melody augmented in
time, or played slower)

Inversion

(a melody inverted in pitch or
turned upside down, or standing
on its head)

Retrogression

(a melody played backwards, starting
with the last note, and finishing
with the first)

Embellishment

Coda

Instrumental color

Dance

Mood

(Staccato)

(Legato)

Canon – An examination of the film

I

In the opening sequence, we see several hands placed on top of one another which begin rapidly to change positions. How is this game of “hot hands” related to “rounds” in music?

- Q.1** What is the most essential feature of a “canon” or a “round”?
- Q.2** Can the imitating voices follow at any distance of time?
- Q.3** Can the imitating voices start on different pitches from the leader?
- Q.4** What is the difference between a “round” and a “canon”?
- Q.5** Is every round a canon?
- Q.6** Is every canon a round?

Activity

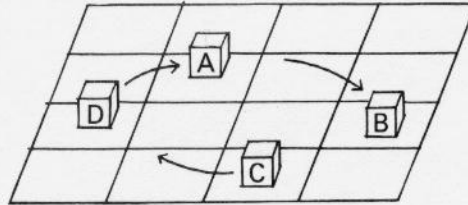
Write the main title on the chalkboard:

C A N O N
C A N O N
C A N O N
C A N O N
C A N O N

- Q.7** What are the similarities between the layout of this title and a musical canon?
- Q.8** Can you see where it makes sense vertically?

II

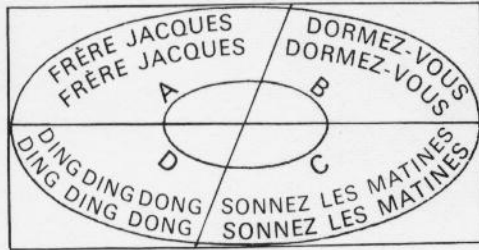
The next sequence illustrates four alphabet blocks doing a patterned dance on a checkered square to the tune of *Frère Jacques*. Each block gyrates rhythmically and in identical sequence, just as four groups of singers would sing in succession their respective parts.



Which block will leave the board first?
What is the pitch relationship of each block?

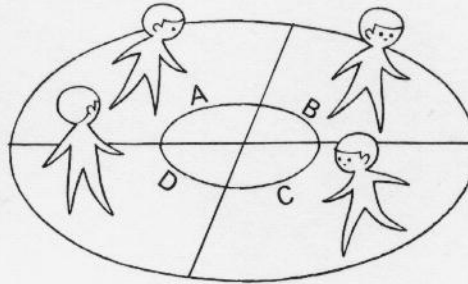
Activity

Let four of your more proficient singers stand in a circle at the front of the room. Write the phrases of *Frère Jacques* on the chalkboard behind them, as illustrated.



As each one sings his phrase, he steps around the circle to the corresponding phrases on the chalkboard.

Thus, the orderly progression of a round is not only *heard* and *seen*; it is participated in by *physical involvement*.



III

In the third sequence, we see four little animated men. They are identified by color: Red, Green, Blue and Yellow.

Note that the movements of the men are related to the mood or feeling of the music: Gliding, Swaying, Nodding, Drifting, Jerking.

One little man:

The theme is stated by the piano. The first little man does his complete dance to the whole piece, solo. This gives the viewer a chance to know what to expect when each of the other little men appear in their turn.

Two little men:

Q.9 When the two little men do a dance one above the other, is it a canon or a round?

Q.10 Can you point out anything special about this canon?

Four little men:

Q.11 When the four little men dance together, is it a canon or a round?

Q.12 In what other way does the dance of the four little men differ from the dance of the two little men?

Q.13 Is there anything a bit unusual about how this round finishes?

Activity

Allow the pupils to express actions freely associated with the word sense or mood of the particular round.

Some popular rounds are:

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Frères Jacques

Oh, How Lovely Is the Evening

White Coral Bells

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Three Blind Mice

IV

In the final sequence, we experience a canon where the theme is first stated by the piano and by a solitary man making his way across the screen by a series of odd and humorous actions.

He is followed by a seemingly endless line of identical men who, by their interactions, start making a musical canon.

Note the variations and embellishments which are developed to increase the enjoyment and understanding:

- Piano changes to spinet when female actor emerges.
- Use of butterflies to illustrate an embellished theme.
- Inversion of the characters, thereby illustrating melodic inversion.
- Quiet return to original melody acted out by two characters representing musical coda.

Q.14 Is there any *diminution* of the theme? (played in less bars)

Q.15 Is there any *augmentation*? (played in more bars)

Q.16 Is there any *inversion*? (turned upside down)

Q.17 Is there any *retrogression*? (played backwards)

Q.18 Is there ever any more than one canon going on at the same time?

Q.19 What are some other variations?

Q.20 Is there any embellishment of the main theme?

Activity

After initial familiarity with the film is made, let the students discuss what they see with the sound off. It may even be desirable to use silent speed.

Students love to have repeated screenings of the film, in order to follow the various characters in the film in their respective roles. With repetition, the structure of a round, and of a canon, will become more and more meaningful.

Answers

1. Strict imitation; the imitating voice follows the leader exactly.
2. Yes, each can follow a great many bars later, or as close as one note behind.
3. Yes
4. A round is a perpetual or circle-canon; the music can go on and on until the musicians want to stop, because the end is dovetailed with the beginning. A canon that does not link onto itself cannot be called a round.
5. Yes
6. No
7. It makes sense in two directions, horizontally and vertically. Reading from left to right, the meanings (or "melodies") are always the same, but staggered. Reading from top to bottom, some new meanings (or "harmonies") appear.
8. Can, canon, anon, non, on.
A really good canon makes as much sense vertically (harmonically) as it does horizontally (melodically).
9. A canon.
10. The second man imitates the first man very soon (actually, one beat apart).
11. A round, a 4-part one.
12. The entries (and therefore the imitations) are spaced out much farther apart in time (actually, four bars apart).
13. In most rounds, the first part to enter is the first to drop out; in this case it is different.
14. Yes; twice, four times, and even eight times.
15. No
16. Yes
17. Yes
18. Yes; the cats make a silent visual canon with themselves, while the main human canon is still going on.
19. The piano changes to a spinet when the female actor emerges. When the men don't kick the woman, the melodic theme becomes simpler, and turns percussive.
20. Yes. The two butterflies fluttering around the last man embellish and accompany an enriched version of the main theme. If you listen very carefully, you will find that the two butterflies form a very close 2-part canon with themselves, so close that one imitates the other $1/6$ of a second later.