Music analysis: Alla Turca

Background

Alla Turca was composed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (27 January 1756 – 5 December 1791). Mozart was an Austrian composer, and a prolific and influential composer of the Classical era. He was a musical genius, able to play piano when he was only three years old and actively composing by the time he was six years old. Over his lifetime, he composed over 600 works, including a wide variety of symphonic, concertante, chamber, piano, operatic, and choral music. He is also among the most enduringly popular of the classical composers, and his influence on European music’s development is clear.

Alla Turca was composed in Paris in 1778, when Mozart was 22 years old. A full performance of Alla Turca takes about three and a half minutes. Alla Turca is from the third movement of Sonata No. 11 in A major (K.331). The original title of the piece was "Klaviersonate Nummer 11." It is written in three movements: Andante Grazioso (a theme with six variations), Menuetto (a minuet and trio), and Alla Turca (Allegretto in A Minor).

Style

Mozart wrote a total of nineteen piano sonatas, each of them clear and bright. Over time, Sonata No. 11 in A Major has become the most popular one. For Alla Turca, Mozart fully intended this movement to be played with a Janissary attachment.
During the eighteenth century it was especially popular across Europe, especially in Vienna, to try to include many aspects of Turkish culture into art and music. Alla Turca, popularly known as the Turkish Rondo, is often heard on its own, and is one of Mozart's best-known piano pieces. Because Turkish music was “in vogue,” it imitates the sound of Turkish Janissary bands. However, the way “Turkish music” is described here is not really the music of Turkey itself, but rather the musical style that was used by the European composers of the Classical music era who would try to imitate it. In Mozart's time, the last movement was sometimes performed on pianos built with a “Turkish stop,” which would allow the song being performed to be embellished with extra percussion effects.

**Melody**

Alla Turca is a piano sonata. The main melody is played almost entirely by the right hand, while the left hand plays supporting chords. Each section is very clearly different from the others. Sixteenth notes and eighth notes are used often throughout the whole piece. The lowest note Mozart used is D2 sharp, and the highest note is E6.

The opening theme consists of rising turn-figures, which outlines a minor arpeggio. It uses grace notes, which help to accent the first beat of the bar from measures five through eight. From measure nine to measure fifteen, major third and minor third intervals are both used. The sonata goes back to the beginning theme from measure sixteen through to the end of the A section. In measure twenty-three, a trill is used, while the left hand plays a broken chord as accompaniment.
In the B section, the right hand consistently plays octaves, while the left hand uses arpeggios as grace notes for percussive effect. In the C section, the right hand plays sixteenths notes for the entire section, and the left hand plays broken chords.

Since this piece is in the rondo form, the B section comes out again after the C section, and is then followed by the A section. From measures eighty-nine to ninety-six, a variation of the B section is featured. The right hand plays broken octaves in sixteenth notes, but the left hand plays exactly the same patterns as the original B section. Finally, the last section is the coda, with the phrasing subtly changed. The right hand uses triads, and it also plays some accents in measures 99, 105, 112, and 118.

Harmony

For harmony, a number of keys are used at the beginning of the A section: A Minor, changing to E Minor at measure five, C Major at measure nine, and then returning to A Minor at measure thirteen. The repeat of the opening idea in bars seventeen through nineteen leads to a tonic cadence in A Minor, and is finished by an Italian sixth chord in measure twenty.

The whole B section is in A Major. The C section starts in F-sharp Minor, and then goes to C-sharp Minor in measure thirty-seven. In measures forty-one through forty-eight, it switches to A Major, and finally the F-sharp Minor passage returns in bars forty-eight through fifty-six, although the second half of this is modified to keep the music in that key, and closes with a perfect cadence.

The B section in measures fifty-seven to sixty-four repeats measures twenty-five to thirty-two, and is in A Major like the first time. After that, the A section comes back again, in A Minor, E Minor, C Major, and finally back to A Minor. The B section then
repeats again, but with the right hand octaves broken into pairs of octave-leaping sixteenth notes. The music stays in A Major from measure eighty-nine, again featuring the B section, to the end. For the coda, the chord progression in this repeated figure is a very strong I - IV - I - V, which resolves onto the tonic in order to start the next version of the phrase. The last six bars of the piece are an affirmation of the tonic A Major harmony, and that brings the work to a loud finish.

**Rhythm**

The time signature for this piece is 2/4, and the tempo is allegretto. This is a moderately quick tempo; slightly slower than allegro, but faster than andante. For rhythm, Mozart chose to use four sixteenth notes as beats in the C section for the right hand. He also used a lot of grace notes to decorate the main melody.

**Form**

The structure of the piece is in a rondo form: A-B-C-B-A-B’-coda. Rondo form gets its name because one or two sections keep coming around again and again. Rondo form in the Classical music era generally settled into the A-B-A-C-A-B-A form.

While this piece is a rondo, the A section only occurs twice in this piece. Traditionally in rondo form, the first theme is the one presented most frequently, but in this piece the A Major idea from measure twenty-five (the B section) becomes the more important idea as the movement progresses, occurring three times and forming the basis of the coda.

The opening A section is in miniature ternary form. The melodic right hand of the C section of the structure contrasts well with the A section’s A Minor theme at the beginning of the movement. Repeat marks are used nine times in this piece.
Texture

This movement is homophonic. The right hand plays the main melody, while the left hand plays chords as accompaniment.

Dynamics

There are no significant dynamic changes. On the music score, the only markings for this movement are piano and forte; piano for the A and C sections, and forte for the B section. When playing, performers sometimes include their own dynamic changes in the coda section, even though Mozart does not include them in the score.

As a performer, if we know the background, tempo, style, key, and structure of this piece, we will be able to play it better.

Reference

