

De-mystifying Musical Analysis

(Music in Context)

The term ‘musical analysis’ seems to scare people away from a serious study of music. There really is nothing to be afraid of, for it helps us to understand the music and thus enjoy it more. It is good for performers, so that they better understand what they are playing instead of just producing a set of notes – this makes the performance more musical. *And* it encourages us *all* to actually *listen* to the music, rather than just hear it.

Listen

Melody

You should listen to the music several times before you look at the score. As you listen try to pick out a melody that stands out for you.

- Does it start immediately, or can you hear an introduction first?
- Can you hear that melody again, or do you hear another melody that seems equally as important?
- How often do you hear this, or these, melodies?

Many melodies contain short melodic fragments (motifs).

- Can you hear motifs that seem to be repeated a number of times?
- Do you notice these motifs being developed and worked on during the work?
- Do they change at all?
- Do the melodies change?

Many melodies are made up of two or three phrases, ones that answer or balance the others.

- Can you hear melodies that have answering phrases – for example, one four-bar phrase being balanced by another?
- Do the phrases sound even, or is one longer than the other?
- Can you hear compositional devices such as stepwise movement, arpeggios, leaps, repeated notes, sequences and imitation (where melodic motifs are being played in another part)?
- Can you determine just what makes up the melodies that you hear?

Instrumentation

As you listen, try to determine what instruments you can hear playing.

- Is it scored for a full orchestra, do you think, or is it a small ensemble?

- If you hear a full orchestra playing the music, does it start immediately, or is only part of the orchestra playing at the beginning?
- At what point do more instruments come in?
- Can you hear one or more solo instruments in the work?
- What role do the various instruments play? (Are they all playing the same thing, or do some play thematic material and some play an accompaniment role?)

Contrast

Most composers use contrast as a way of maintaining interest for the listener.

- Do you notice any contrasts in the music?
- Are there changes in dynamics? Are there changes in instrumentation (large number of instruments playing in contrast to a small number of instruments)?
- Are there changes in tempo?
- Is it more the same than it is different, or are there obvious differences as the music progresses?
- Is one instrumental section contrasted with another? (different timbres – tone colours – in the sound)

Tonality

Listen for the tonality.

- Is it major or minor, or perhaps atonal or chromatic?
- Does it appear to change key while you listen?
- Does it change tonality as you listen?

Rhythm

Rhythm is an important element in music.

- Is the beat obvious or is it more hidden?
- Can you hear a simple rhythmic pattern, of perhaps one note per beat, or is the rhythm more complex than that?
- Does it feel as if it is in simple or compound time? Duple, triple or quadruple time?
- Do the parts (various instruments) play the same rhythm, or are there different rhythmic patterns for each part?
- Do you hear specific rhythmic patterns throughout the music?

Repetition

Just as you might be able to hear repetition within a melody, so too you can hear it in a larger work.

- Do you notice sections which you have heard before?
- Do they appear to be the same as the previous time you heard them, or are they a little different?
- Is one section followed by the same one repeated, or is it followed by something different?
- Do you hear one section a number of times but with different things happening between each repetition?

Look

Having listened to the work a number of times, become familiar with the sound of it, *and* tried to determine some or all of the above, you are now ready to look at the score.

The score is the printed representation of the sounds, and for the music reader is another way to more easily understand the music – where the music can be seen as well as heard.

Listen to the music while following the score. Do this a number of times so that the sound is really imprinted in your memory but also so that the visual image of the notation can draw connections for you. That little piccolo riff is more noticeable and memorable once you can see it as well.

Look for important features:

- the key – what is the key signature, and the overall key of the work?
- the time signature?
- the scoring – what instruments is it scored for and when do they play?
- the main theme - what instrument (or group of instruments) has it and where does it start? What instruments play?
- a second theme - where is it and who plays it? Is it in the original key, or has it changed key? If it has changed key, what relationship is the new key to the original one? What instruments play?
- subsequent themes – are there any? Where?
- repeat signs, double bar lines, rehearsal number numbers or letters - these can indicate sections of music
- a section where the melodic material is clearly being worked on, or developed, where you see and hear melodic material that is familiar but not the same as previously played (perhaps some small part is being developed, where it can also undergo a number of key changes)
- a repeat of a previous section, in either the original key or a different key.

It is a good idea to lightly annotate in pencil the above points on the score, so that you can start to see the overall structure of the work.

Look again

[This section is from SSABSA's Support Materials - Music Teaching and Learning Strategies, Music in Context - *Six points of Musical Style (plus one)* (musc-ti-015.doc) by Christabel Saddler.]

After identifying a work's important features (elements of style) look at the work again as a whole and discover how the elements interact to create the composer's desired outcome.

Melody

- does it move in leaps or steps?
- Is it legato (smooth) or staccato-like (short and detached)?
- is the approximate range, small or large?
- are the phrases balanced or uneven?
- are there clear cut cadence points?
- is it motivic or lyrical?
- is there frequent and consistent use of sequence?

Harmony/Tonality

- is it diatonic, modal, atonal, polytonal?
- what keys are used and how are they related to each other, if at all?
- does it use another scale or tonal-system?
- does it use chromatic chords?
- does it have treatment and resolution of dissonance, any unresolved dissonance?
- does it have clear cadence points, consistent harmonic rhythm (when does the harmony change)?

Rhythm/Metre

- is it metric (clear time signature) or free flowing?
- are there irregular metres and time changes?
- are there rhythmic contrasts e.g. 3 against 2?
- does it use speech rhythms (Gregorian chant or recitative)?
- are the note values all very similar or constantly changing?
- does the rhythm develop or is it made up of repeated motives?
- are the phrases balanced or uneven?

Timbre/Dynamics

- what instruments and/or voices are used? how are they combined?
- are there few or many?
- how is the sound built up?
- is the use of dynamics unexpected or logical?
- how does sound intensity (loudness or softness) contribute to the music?

Texture

- does one texture predominate (polyphonic, homophonic, monophonic) or is it a mixture? i.e. multi layered?
- is it thick and heavy or light, clear and transparent? What makes it so?

Form

- is the structure clear? eg. binary, ternary, rondo, sonata, theme and variation.
- is it free flowing, episodic, through composed or cyclical? (all useful terms for 'it goes on until it stops with some repeats')
- is it determined by factors outside the music? e.g. words or story.

Underlying Ethos (please note: none of these points are mutually exclusive)

- why was it written? Is it a means of personal creative expression or a response to financial need (or both) or the composer just doing a job?
- what is its function? Church, concert, theatre, commission?
- is the emotional content personal or universal?

Writing an analysis

If all of the above points are annotated lightly on the score, you already have the basis for your analysis. You may have circled melodic motifs that are used often and linked them with arrows to similar motifs in other parts. You may have circled chords, or patterns of chords if they have significance. As you listen and follow the score each time, you will notice more about the work and be making connections in thematic and harmonic material from section to section.

You can write the analysis from the beginning and do it bar by bar. The annotations you have made will start to make much greater sense as you notice the original thematic material and subsequent use of it, the overall structure of the work, the composer's use of compositional devices to carry the music. Often, when you really look carefully at what the composer has done, you can see how he has used previous material and just worked with it to create an extended work e.g. themes can be built from simple motifs or sequences; set harmonic progressions might be the underlying base for thematic material that goes above; melodies might be played backwards, or inverted, extended or condensed, to create something new from something old; and so on.

In your analysis, refer to bar numbers or section numbers so that you know where things occur. You will notice, perhaps, that musical idea 'a' appears at bar 1, and again at bar 48, and maybe even again at bar 124 of the work. The structure of the work is now becoming more obvious, and you will be able to identify the form of the work. Most forms have a particular style about them so you can look for what had become the norm and then look for any deviations from it (and some composers deliberately deviated from a set form, in order to create something a little special).

Use your knowledge of the overall form to guide you. Where deviations have occurred, you will be able to point them out. If, for example, your work is in sonata form, you will be able to identify the exposition, discuss the themes in this section, identify where the development begins and what thematic material it contains, and where the recapitulation commences. You will be able to identify keys and discuss key relationships.

You might like to begin writing analyses with a very simple one, perhaps the *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, by Mozart. This work is straightforward and allows us to easily see all compositional devices.

Using the above outline for analysing music you will find that the more you do, the better and more confident you will become at it. Enjoy the challenge and your newly-learned expertise.

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