

Melodic and rhythmic devices

A composer may use various melodic and rhythmic devices – what we might describe as musical ‘tricks of the trade’ – to add interest and variety to a musical idea, or perhaps to extend or develop it in some way. The most important of these devices are illustrated below, based on this musical idea (taken from the opening of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto):



DECORATION

Here, the melody is *decorated* or varied by the addition of ornaments and other extra notes:



SEQUENCE

A phrase of the melody may be immediately repeated at a slightly higher or lower pitch. This is called *sequence*:



IMITATION

One vocal or instrumental part sets off with a snatch of melody, then is immediately *imitated*, or copied, by another part bringing in the same tune:



If a complete melody is strictly imitated in this way, the result is a *canon* or *round* (as, for example, *Frère Jacques*).

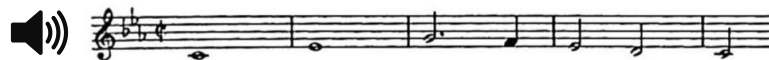
INVERSION

The tune may be *inverted* – ‘turned upside down’ – so that intervals rising in pitch in the original version now fall, and vice versa:



AUGMENTATION

The melody may be drawn out by using notes of longer value. This is called *augmentation*:



DIMINUTION

Or the composer may use *diminution* – presenting the melody in notes of shorter value:



OSTINATO A melodic, or rhythmic, fragment may be repeated over and over again as an *ostinato* (Italian: 'obstinate'):



SYNCOPATION By using *syncopation*, the composer alters in some way the expected stress of the beats in a bar - perhaps by placing a rest on a strong beat, or placing an accent on a weak beat:



Melodic & Rhythmic Devices

Motive

Rhythmic Augmentation

Diminution



Diatonic Transposition

Chromatic (Exact) Transposition



Melodic Inversion

Retrograde

Retrograde – Inversion



Change of Mode

Intervallic Contraction

Intervallic Expansion



Elaboration / Ornamentation (adding notes)

Passing Tones

Neighbor Tones

Chordal Skips (arpeggiation)



Melodic Sequence

Fragmentation and Sequence



Imitation

Stretto Imitation



Example of Repetition & Sequences

Mendelssohn: *The Hebrides*

Allegro moderato

Motif

Repetition

Sequence a 5th higher

Sequence a 3rd higher

The image shows two staves of music in bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 7/8 time signature. The top staff contains a motif of seven notes, followed by a repetition of the same motif, and then two sequences of the motif: one raised a fifth and another raised a third. The bottom staff continues the sequence of the motif raised a fifth.

Example of Imitation, Augmentation & Inversion

Bach: Invention No.1 in C major

motif

imitation

inverted motif

sequence

first 4 notes augmented

sequence

sequence

sequence

sequence

The image shows a two-staff piano score in C major, 3/4 time. The top staff features a motif (1) and its imitation (2). The bottom staff shows an inverted motif (3), followed by a sequence (4), and then further sequences. The first four notes of the sequence are augmented.

Example of Motivic Development

OBOE

Allegretto

p

a

b

a

c

a

d

e

etc.

The image shows an oboe melody in 2/4 time, marked Allegretto and piano. It consists of nine numbered phrases. Phrase (a) is the initial motif. Phrase (b) extends the motif. Phrase (c) is a modified and inverted version of (b). Phrase (d) extends (c), and phrase (e) is a modified version of (d) ending with a repeated-note figure.

The above is the oboe melody near the beginning of the fourth movement of Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, composed in 1943. The whole passage is built out of the motif provided by the first three notes (a). The motif is then extended (b), and this new version of the initial idea is later modified and turned upside down (c). Note that (c) is not an exact inversion of (b): the intervals are not precisely the same. Phrase (d) is an extension of (c) and the final phrase (e) is a modified version of (d) (compare bar 8 with 7), ending with a repeated-note figure that can be traced back to (b) at bar 3.

Melodic Development Guidelines

1. **Simple Modification**: Always remember that variety and interest is achieved by a **simple modification of the initial material** whether it's a stimulus you've been given or a small 4-bar melody you composed yourself. Beginners often make the **mistake of introducing too much variety** into their music. Look for ways to **develop the opening material** – **don't give a series of contrasting ideas that bear little relationship to each other or to the initial material!**
2. **Rate of Information**: be careful that you do not give too much information too quickly – so **avoid unnecessary rapid changes** in rhythm, pitch and dynamics allow the listener time to hear! The Rule of 3: 1) State a melody, 2) Repeat or Vary the Melody, 3) Take the Melody in a different direction or a different melody. Bring the original melody back either partially or fully/varied
3. It is very rare that a texture holds throughout a piece or a section without changing to a different texture. **Textures should change as the form changes** (E.g. The A theme is going to have a different texture than a B theme and so on, but there are always exceptions.)
4. Development that **Keeps Both Pitch and Rhythm Intact**
 - *Repetition*: permitted a GCSE, but boring if overused – try to avoid!
 - *Dynamics*: a loud section vs. the same section played softly, again boring – try to avoid
 - *Timbre*: changes in timbre is a mild disguise and not really development
 - *Register*: octave displacement/change of voice. Again this would be mild development
 - *Modulation*: change of key is better than nothing at all.
 - *Counter melody*: the addition of new material intermixed with the old. This is the best!
5. Development that **Keeps the Rhythm Intact** (Changes in Pitch but NOT in Rhythm)
 - *Sequence*: one of the most useful devices in all music to develop melodic fragment. Either diatonic (moving up or down by step in the key) or Chromatic/Real (moving up or down by step but by chromatic notes to preserve the exact intervals...this can change the key).
 - *Intervalllic Contraction/Expansion*: change one or more melodic intervals of the melody. A leap of 3rd can become 4th and a skip of a 5th can become a 7th, and so on.
 - *Mutation*: involves changes between the major and minor modes
 - *Inversion*: free-contrary motion that retains the basic interval identity but in the key; or strict-chromatic motion that matches the interval identity exactly (can change the key)
6. Development that **Keeps the Pitch Intact** (Rhythm changes NOT the pitch)
 - *Rhythmic Alteration*: changing of position of accents or change in meter.
 - *Augmentation*: doubling the value of all notes
 - *Diminution*: cutting in half the value of all notes.
7. Development that **Changes Both Pitch & Rhythm**
 - *Gradual Metamorphosis*: Motifs are established early in the piece. The motifs then go through small changes to morph into a new melody.
 - *Sudden Metamorphosis*: The old motif suddenly moves to the new motif.
 - *Decoration (Heterophony)*: ornamenting original melody both by pitch and rhythm.
 - *Fragmentation and Extension*: stating only part of the melody, extending melody beyond itself.
 - *Cadential Extension*: delaying the resolution of a melody by one a device discussed on this page.
 - *Interpolation*: internal extension
 - *Truncation*: motif jumps suddenly to the end, leaves out the middle of the melody
 - *Elision/overlap*: overlapping of a melody on itself (much like a stretto but involving one voice)
 - *Retrograde*: the melody is presented backwards
 - *Retrograde Inversion* (Free & Real): the melody is presented backwards and inverted
 - *Condensation*: shorting of melody by stages...State the motif, repeat it, and then repeat half of that, then a repeat a quarter of that, until the composer decides where else to go.