

“The composer ... joins Heaven and Earth with threads of sound.”

—Alan Hovhaness (1911–2000)

KEY POINTS

- **Texture** refers to the interweaving of the melodic lines with harmony.
- The simplest texture is **monophony**, a single voice or line without accompaniment.
- **Polyphony** describes a many-voiced texture with different melodic lines, based on **counterpoint**—one line set against another.
- **Homophony** occurs when one melodic voice is prominent over the accompanying lines or voices.
- **Imitation**—when a melodic idea is presented in one voice, then restated in another—is a common unifying technique in polyphony; **canons** and **rounds** are two types of strictly imitative works.

TYPES OF TEXTURE

Melodic lines may be thought of as the various threads that make up the musical fabric, or the **texture**, of a piece. The simplest texture is **monophony**: a single voice. (“Voice” refers to an individual part or line, even in instrumental music.) Here, the melody is heard without any harmonic accompaniment or other melodic lines; it’s you singing in the shower. It may be accompanied by rhythm and percussion instruments that embellish it, but interest is focused on the single melodic line rather than on any harmony. Until about a thousand years ago, the Western music we know about was monophonic.

Polyphony (“many-voiced”) describes a texture in which two or more different melodic lines are combined, thus distributing melodic interest among all the parts. Polyphonic texture is based on **counterpoint**; that is, one musical line set against another.

In perhaps the most commonly heard texture, **homophony**, a single voice takes over the melodic interest, while the accompanying lines are subordinate. Normally, the accompanying lines become blocks of harmony, the chords that support, color, and enhance the principal line. Homophonic texture is heard when a pianist plays a melody in the right hand while the left sounds the chords, or when a singer or violinist carries the tune against a harmonic accompaniment on the piano. Homophonic texture, then, is based on harmony, just as polyphonic texture is based on counterpoint. The differences between the two can be subtle, depending on whether a listener perceives additional musical lines as equal or subordinate to a primary melody.



Monophonic: One melodic line, no accompaniment.

Hildegard of Bingen: *Kyrie* (chant):

Ky - ri - e - lei - son



Polyphonic: Two independent melodic lines combined.

Bach: Organ chorale prelude *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* (example begins 20 seconds into the recording):

Line 1

Line 2



Homophonic: One melody with subordinate accompaniment.

Haydn: *Symphony No. 94 (Surprise)*, II:

Violin I

Cello and bass

semplice *ten.* *ten.*

p *p*



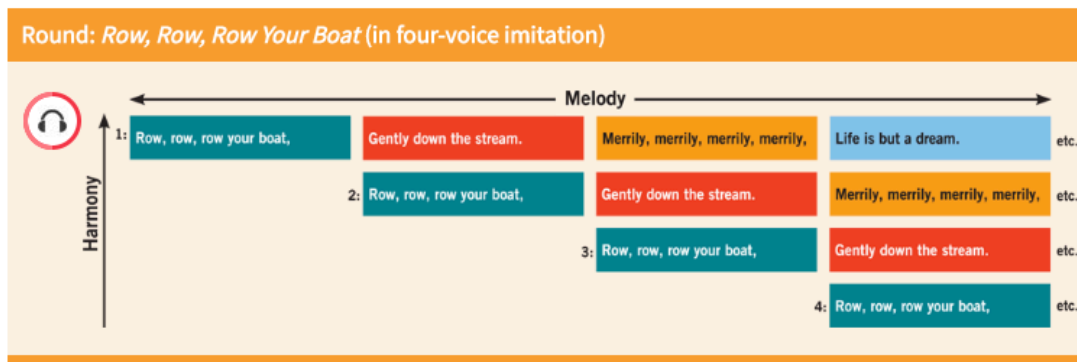
Homorhythmic: A type of homophonic texture in which all voices move together, with the same words.

Handel: "Hallelujah Chorus," from *Messiah*:

Rhythm				
Soprano	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,
Alto	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,
Tenor	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,
Bass	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,	Hal - le - lu - jah,

A composition need not use one texture exclusively throughout. For example, a large-scale work may begin by presenting a melody with accompanying chords (homophony), after which the interaction of the parts becomes increasingly complex as more independent melodies enter (creating polyphony).

We have noted that melody is the horizontal aspect of music, while harmony is the vertical. Comparing musical texture to the cross weave of a fabric makes the interplay of the parts clear. The horizontal threads, the melodies, are held together by the vertical threads, the harmonies. Out of their interaction comes a texture that may be light or heavy, coarse or fine.



CONTRAPUNTAL DEVICES

When several independent lines are combined (in polyphony), one method that composers use to give unity and shape to the texture is **imitation**, in which a melodic idea is presented in one voice and then restated in another. While the imitating voice restates the melody, the first voice continues with new material. Thus, in addition to the vertical and horizontal threads in musical texture, a third, diagonal line results from imitation (see example opposite).

The duration of the imitation may be brief or it may last the entire work. A strictly imitative work is known as a **canon**; and the simplest and most familiar form of canon is a **round**, in which each voice enters in succession with the same melody that can be repeated endlessly. Well-known examples include *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* and *Frère Jacques (Are You Sleeping?)*. In the example opposite, the round begins with one voice singing “Row, row, row your boat,” then another voice joins it in imitation, followed by a third voice and finally a fourth, creating a four-part polyphonic texture.

Musical Texture and the Listener

Different textures require different kinds of listening. Monophonic music has only one focus—the single line of melody unfolding in real time. In homophonic music, the primary focus is on the main melody with subordinate harmonies as accompaniment. Indeed, much of the music we have heard since childhood—including traditional and popular styles—consists of melody and accompanying chords. Homorhythmic texture is easily recognizable as well, in its simple, vertical conception and hymnlike movement; the melody is still the most obvious line. Polyphonic music, with several independent melodies woven together, requires more experienced listening, but a good place to start is the round, the simplest polyphonic texture. With practice, you can hear the roles of individual voices and determine how they relate to each other, providing texture throughout a musical work.