

THE ELEMENTS OF MUSIC: A Brief Introduction



Melody

Melody: The Tune. Melody is a single line of notes heard in succession as a coherent unit. A melody has shape, moving up or down in ways that capture and hold our attention over a span of time. A melody is like a story: it has a beginning, a middle, and an end.



Rhythm

Rhythm: The Time. Rhythm is the ordering of music through time. Not all music has a melody, but all music has rhythm. A drum solo, for example, makes its effect primarily through rhythm. Rhythm can operate at many levels, from a repetitive, underlying pulse or beat to rapidly changing patterns of longer and shorter sounds.



Harmony

Harmony: Supporting the Melody. Harmony is the sound created by multiple voices playing or singing together. Harmony enriches the melody by creating a fuller sound than can be produced by a single voice.



Texture

Texture: Thick and Thin. Texture is based on the number and general relationship of musical lines or voices. Every work of music has a texture from thick (many voices) to thin (a single voice). Sometimes one line or voice is more important; at other times, all the lines or voices are of equal importance.



Timbre

Timbre: The Color of Music. Timbre is the character of a sound. The same melody sounds very different when performed by a violin, a clarinet, a guitar, or a human voice. These sources can all produce the same pitch, but what makes the same melody sound different is the timbre of each one.



Dynamics

Dynamics: Loud to Soft. The same music can be performed at many degrees of volume, from very soft to very loud. Dynamics determine the volume of a given work or passage in a work of music.



Form

Form: The Architecture of Music. A single melody is usually too short to constitute a complete work of music. Typically, a melody is repeated, varied, or contrasted with a different melody. The way in which all these subunits are put together—the structure of the whole—is musical form. Form is based on repetition (**A A**), variation (**A A'**), contrast (**A B**), or some combination of these three possibilities.



Word-Music Relationships

Word-Music Relationships: How Words Shape What We Hear. If there is a text to be sung, we must consider the relationship of the words to the music. How does the music capture the meaning and spirit of its text? And even if there is not a text to be sung, many works have titles that suggest how we might hear them. Titles like *Winter, Rodeo*, and *The Rite of Spring* strongly influence the way in which we hear these works. Some composers have even written detailed descriptions of what a particular work is about in what we call “program music.”



Genre

Genre: Great Expectations. When we get into a car, we imagine what kind of a trip we are about to take and where we are going: business, pleasure, across town, across the state. When we listen to a work of music, we have similar expectations. Symphony, opera, and song are all examples of genres. Each one tells us in advance how long it is likely to be, what kinds of instruments or voices we will hear, and what kinds of forms we might hear. Genre also tells us about the function of a work. Dance music, for example, serves a different purpose from music to be used in a service of worship.

No matter what the period or style, all music grows out of some combination of these basic elements.