

# COMPOSING USING A MOTIF

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## *The building blocks of rhythm and pitch*

### Podcast #3

Hello. Today I will present the third of a series of podcasts on composing using different musical elements. How DO composers write successful pieces and what makes a successful piece of music anyway? The simple answer is. . . there IS no simple answer. The fact is composing isn't a matter of formula. There's no magical recipe which calls for one cup of melody, 1/2 cup of harmony mixed with one cup of rhythm and 3 tablespoons repetition in order to produce a good piece. All the elements I've just mentioned: melody, harmony, rhythm and repetition are important, but how to put them together successfully can't be prescribed beforehand. What we CAN do is examine some effective compositions and try to hear what makes them work. It is certainly true that we often know a first-class piece when we hear it. Many times we remember it long afterward. Perhaps it sounds like this (Penny Lane opening), or this (Take 5 opening) or this (Beethoven's 5th).

All the well-known works you've just heard share one important element in their construction: they're based on one or more musical motifs, short building blocks of rhythm and pitch. Motif is a French word which in music means a very short idea used throughout a piece in various ways which helps to give the composition both unity and character. Let's look a bit more closely at the three pieces you've just heard. The first example is Penny Lane, written by Paul McCartney in 1966 and performed by the Beatles. We hear the important motif right away with the distinctive rhythm McCartney has given the title words of the song (I SING IT). The song is an AAB form for the verses and each of the first two lines of each verse uses the opening rhythm, as does the chorus. However, McCartney doesn't stop there. The motif appears in other places in each verse either in its original or in modified form. As a result, the rhythm in question permeates the song and acts as a unifying factor which gives Penny Lane its characteristic sound. Listen to the whole song and try to count how many times the rhythm shows up in one form or another and I think you'll be amazed.

Now let's look at our second example. It's the theme from "Take 5" written in 1959 by Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond and gets its title from the fact that it's in 5/4, one of the first jazz pieces ever composed in that meter. If we listen to the theme we notice it's comprised of four distinct rhythmic elements: a group of swung (or uneven) eighth notes used as pickup notes and to begin the first bar; two quarters to finish the first bars (PLAY), and then dotted half notes alternating with eighth-note triplets and a quarter note for the remaining bars in the 4-bar phrase. The phrase is then repeated with a slight melodic change at the end before the piece moves on to the second theme. And it's in the second theme that the beginning motif of swung eighth notes really takes over, giving the second theme a different character from the first, but with the unifying factor of the underlying motif making the A and B themes seem like two sides of the same coin. Let's listen. (NO INTRO, then first AB)

Our third example includes probably the best-known 4-note motif in musical history. It is, of course the opening of Beethoven's revolutionary Fifth Symphony. It was revolutionary not just because the orchestration was advanced for the time but also because of the way Beethoven constructed the first movement. He had always been a motivic composer, but never before had he based an entire symphonic movement almost solely on one short idea. And it is this single-minded, almost obsessive development of the four-note motif which the composer nicknamed "Fate knocks at the door" which gives the first movement both its intensity and its phenomenal unity. Let's listen to the first statement to hear how Beethoven uses the motif over and over in melodic sequence to create his theme (PLAY). Did you count? Beethoven uses the motif 13 times in the space of only 19 bars of 2/4 meter. Does he use the motif with the same pitches in the same way all 13 times? Of course not. The genius of the piece is how Beethoven makes the motif fit the harmonic progression and uses it in call-and-response fashion as well, with the response in inversion (that is, upside down from the original shape of the motif). When you take into account that the motif appears literally hundreds of times in different instruments during the course of the movement's 7 ? minutes AND that any other material is used only to answer or extend the motif temporarily, this movement is an amazing testament to the potential power of a single motif in constructing a piece of music.

Historical examples are all very well, but we only see them in their finished form unless we have the extraordinary privilege of viewing Beethoven's sketchbook. What happens when YOU want to compose a piece and haven't a clue where or how to begin? Where do you start?

There are several approaches and coming up with an effective motivic idea can be a very good one. Of course, it is important to remember that beginning the piece may be the hardest single step, but that creating an effective work involves many successive small steps as you try to get closer to the musical idea you wish to convey.

Let's look at one example, a piece created in stages by an 8th grade student named Anna. Anna began with several simple motifs. The first is an even eighth note idea heard right at the beginning (PLAY). The second motif is an eighth note followed by two sixteenths and then two eighth notes. (PLAY). In fact, much of what makes this piece tick is Anna's ability to play groups of even rhythms of eighths and sixteenths off against groups of mixed values like the two sixteenths and an eighth. Listen to how she builds to an early climax with trading the two motifs back and forth before bringing everyone together playing steady sixteenth notes. (PLAY OPUS XI.) While Anna's piece does not feature a single melodic idea, she utilizes Beethoven's technique of building a piece through the use of short motifs. What she does throughout is use these ideas over and over in different combinations and in different configurations. This gives the piece both unity and its own character, as well as the intensity which comes both from the particular quality of the motifs and from hearing them over and over. Let's listen to Anna's first revision so we can get a sense of how she begins to develop the piece. Notice how she piles the statements of the motifs one on top of the other, overlapping them to give the work its momentum and driving force. (PLAY OPUS XI, REVISION 1.)

Let's review a bit of what we've talked about in this podcast. First, it's important to state again that successful composing isn't a matter of formula and that there are many approaches, which can produce an effective piece. You can start with the melody, harmony, rhythm, words or some other element. One element is a motif, which needs to be both short and easily recognized in order to be effective. Once you have such a motif, there are many different ways in which it can be used, but frequent repetition is vitally important as is varying the motif while keeping it recognizable. The motif may be

stretched, slowed down, sped up, played in different ranges, by different voices or instruments, used in canon with itself, the intervals may be changed. . . you get the picture. However, it must be given in its original form enough times so that it can be easily recognized by the listener or it can't be successful. If more than one motif is used of course the possibilities for combining the ideas become greater, but it is important not to overload the piece or the listener's ears with too many motifs. No matter how worthy you may think your tenth motif may be, you and your piece will be better served developing one or two good motifs than adding more and not being able to do them justice while in the process overwhelming your listener. Simplicity and clarity of one or two motifs, used with lots of inventiveness in repetition and development IS a formula for compositional success. Next time we'll talk about composing using a sequence. Please listen in again. I'll be here.