

DEVELOPING IDEAS USING REPETITION AND SIMILARITY

Podcast #6 Erik Neilsen

Hello. This is the fifth in a series of podcasts dealing with creating music using different compositional elements. I hope this particular podcast will begin to answer the question: okay, I've written a theme, now what? There are two basic answers to the question. You can repeat the material partially or completely. (Included in this option is creating and using music derived from the original material.) Or you can create something contrasting. Today we'll deal with the first possibility.

Do you ever wonder how composers, no matter what their style of music, can take a single idea and turn it into a finished work? The single biggest tool for developing a theme is repetition. Here are three examples of repetition. (PLAY "For What It's Worth" from opening words through chorus)(PLAY "Brilliant Corners" from band opening through 30")(PLAY "Morning" through first repetition of theme down P5)

The first example we heard is the opening verse and chorus of the song "For What It's Worth" written in 1966 by Stephen Stills and performed by the band Buffalo Springfield. This is certainly one of the ultimate examples of using repetition of a very short idea to create an effective piece of music. Stills takes the short motif built on the first 3 steps of the major scale in reverse order (SING MI RE DO), then repeats it in modified form 3 times. Even the chorus uses the same 3-note motif 4 times in quasi-call-and-response fashion. When we listen again, note how the chorus has greater intensity both because of the words and particularly because it covers the same material in 2 bars instead of 4 as in the verse (PLAY verse 1 and chorus again). The song, which became one of the signature pieces of the late 1960s, owes much of its effect to its use of only a single short melodic idea repeated with increasing variety throughout the piece.

The second example is "Brilliant Corners", written by Thelonius Monk and recorded by him and his ensemble in 1956. Like many of Monk's pieces, it has a number of unusual facets which set it apart from the jazz mainstream and which marked Monk as a very original composer. First, there is a quirkiness about the melody itself. Like many of Monk's other tunes it has unexpected twists and turns which show both his unusual way of constructing a melody and his sense of humor, marked especially here by the arpeggiated chords at the end of the second phrase, ending in a high note shriek. This actually balances very well with the low rapid-fire repeated notes which end the first phrase. One other aspect to note is that each section of the piece is 22 bars long, certainly NOT the norm in any Western musical form.

In terms of development, Monk lets the tune speak for itself. He alternates sections using the original slow tempo with those using double-time, but even the improvised solos, one each for Ernie Henry on alto sax and Sonny Rollins on tenor sax, Monk himself on piano and Max Roach on drums, stick very close to the original tune for their material, resulting in a piece which for all its unusual characteristics is very tightly constructed. Let's listen to a little of an up-tempo section. (PLAY 1'04"-1'34")

Our third example is "Morning", one of the movements from the "Peer Gynt Suite", written by the late 19th century Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. If you listened to our podcast on sequences, both the Suite and the composer will be familiar to you, as we used another movement, "In the Hall of the Mountain King" as an example. Grieg's composing style is clear and accessible and he makes great use of just a few simple elements to create a piece, making him a fine source for our purposes.

In this piece the theme is a very simple pentatonic melody heard first in flute and then oboe and accompanied by only two chords in the orchestra. (PLAY flute opening again) Grieg continues to alternate flute and oboe with only slight variation until we finally hear the full orchestra playing the theme almost a minute into the piece. (PLAY 50"-1'05") What is especially interesting to note is the

fact that except for two extremely short linking motifs, both of which use only four notes, all we hear in the 3'50" of the total piece is the theme played in different keys, either in parts or in its full form.

We've heard excerpts from three finished pieces. Now let's look at the process of developing an idea as we follow a work in progress. The piece in question is a work for string trio, that is, violin, viola and cello, written by a high school senior named Holly. While the eventual title of the piece was "Shadows on the Water", in the first sketch Holly had no name for it. However, what she did have was a well-developed melody in violin, a descending cello line which provided a strong harmonic foundation and a viola part which filled in the texture and the harmony while also providing rhythmic interest. Let's listen to the opening. (PLAY first theme.) As a beginning composer, Holly was unsure how to proceed with her material, but once she became convinced of its worth she did something both simple and smart: she repeated it, but this time gave the melody to the cello. Hear what a difference that simple change makes. (PLAY A')

Since she had decided on using an AABA form Holly was then faced with the problem of coming up with a B section. Here again she returned to her opening material but with several changes. She altered the rhythmic feel from 6/8 to 3/4, she used the upper range of the violin and while she retained the rocking back and forth between neighbor notes of the main theme she used very different rhythms. So while B sounds quite different from A the underlying material is very similar. Little by little, Holly worked in rhythms from the opening so that when the main theme returned for the recapitulation it fit seamlessly with what had immediately preceded it. Let's listen to the development and the return. (PLAY B AND FADE OUT AT RETURN TO A)

So let's review the most important point in this podcast. It is that repetition of material and also using that material in different ways are very powerful tools in developing a composition. If your material is strong and well-constructed, it is possible to develop it without going very far afield. This approach can result in a piece which is successful especially because it has variety but also has the unity which comes from utilizing the same source material throughout the piece. Why go to the moon when the answer may be right in your own back yard? Just examine your own material closely and who knows what you may discover? In our next podcast we'll talk about developing your ideas using contrast. Please join me.