

DEVELOPMENT USING CONTRAST

Podcast #6 Erik Neilsen

Hello. This is the sixth in a series of podcasts addressing different aspects of music composition. It is also the second of two podcasts which discuss a couple of ways of developing material you've created. In the first we talked about developing ideas through repetition. Let me repeat what I said then. The single most powerful tool for development is repetition, especially when that repetition can be modified in some way. Nothing I say today will contradict that statement. However, there are times when a composer's theme may have such a decided character or the composer's outlook may be such that in addition to repeating ideas, the composer will present a contrasting idea. This can serve several important functions. First, it gives a change of mood through differences of melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, dynamics or some combination of these. Second, it throws the original material into sharper relief and can thus enhance its effect when it returns (a classic reason why ABA and AABA forms have endured for so long). Third, it can make the piece more exciting, unpredictable or fun because the change may be sudden. Let's listen to a few examples. If the original material sounds like this (PLAY "Crooked Crown" 10"-31") then the contrasting material may sound like this ("Crooked Crown 2'07"-2'30"). If the piece has a main theme which sounds like this ("Manteca" 19"-33") then this material provides real contrast ("Manteca" 1'-1'22"). If the first theme sounds like this (Brahms Quintet I 19"-45"), this second theme creates a very different mood (Brahms I 56"-1'12").

Let's talk about each example. The first is "Crooked Crown" written by Maia Sharp and David Batteau and recorded by Bonnie Raitt and her band on her 2005 CD "Souls Alike". The entire song is a study in contrasts as the lyrics alternate between a person's two internal voices, the optimist and the pessimist (something many of us can relate to). This contrast is played out in the music, with two different voice sounds and a decidedly unorthodox set of harmonies in the instrumental accompaniment. The song's distinctive sound is one of the things I like about it. Let's listen to the chorus for a bit more of this flavor. (PLAY "Crooked Crown" chorus 1st time) The bridge brings real contrast to the song, as following a short instrumental break there is a key change, a new melody with a very different character and the real crux of the song's lyrics: "My prodigy and my idiot play for the prize of my delicate line somehow the score at the end of the day is still 51-49". It sets up the return to the chorus a final time in classic rock song form. Let's listen to the bridge again. (PLAY 2'07"-2'30")

The second piece is one of the most famous early examples of Afro-Cuban jazz, "Manteca", written by Pozo Luciano Gonzalez, Dizzy Gillespie and Walter Fuller and recorded by Dizzy Gillespie and his orchestra in 1947. The piece sets up what was for many jazz listeners a new sound in the 1940's, congas followed by a trombone ostinato of octave leaps to set up the Latin sound and then a blistering trumpet solo by Gillespie to really pin the listeners to their seats (that is, if they haven't already jumped up to dance). (PLAY opening-33") After a section using the entire orchestra playing a unison line which acts as a second theme and as it were bridges the gap between Latin and straight-ahead jazz, Dizzy and company cool things down with a much more lyrical section that follows (PLAY 1'-1'22" again). Not only does this give the listener a bit of a breather, it also allows for solos and a return to the opening material later which sounds both fresh and welcome.

The final example is taken from the Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor, Opus 34, by Johannes Brahms. Brahms actually had a great deal of trouble deciding on the appropriate instrumentation to best give voice to the powerful ideas he wished to convey in the piece. It started as a string quartet, then was a work for 2 pianos and finally took the present form combining the sounds of string quartet and piano around 1875, more than 12 years after the first version was written. This is a good example of the truism that even great composers often have trouble with their ideas, a thought I have always found comforting.

This is a large work, over 40 minutes long and in four movements. Our excerpts come from the first movement which begins with a slow, lyrical introduction and then moves immediately to the dramatic first theme we heard earlier. Let's listen again. (PLAY 19"-45") After this it's necessary to have something contrasting. Why? Because it would be almost impossible to keep up the level of intensity of the first theme for a 10-minute movement. So Brahms gives us this lyrical second theme which relies more on the strings and less on the piano than the first theme (PLAY 56"-1'12") Brahms could have returned then to the first theme, but instead gives us yet another theme which combines some features of the first two, an active piano with legato strings (PLAY 1'20"-1'42"). Sounds like too much to keep together, doesn't it, but Brahms manages to not only juggle the three themes, but to integrate them into a powerful first movement in which contrast plays a very important part in the drama.

One of the features of these podcasts is that we often get to look at and listen to a student composition in progress, and this podcast is no exception. Let's examine a work for woodwind quartet (that is, flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon) written by a high school senior named Katie. In her very first sketch Katie showed she was working with unusual material, a combination of a major seventh leap and parts of the chromatic scale. She made a conscious decision before starting the piece which contributed to the unusual sound. This was to saturate the texture with only a few pitches and rhythms. The result is an opening which sounds both nervous with its short ideas passed back and forth among the four instruments call-and-response style, and obsessive with a few pitches and ideas used over and over again. Let's listen to the first 13 bars or so of the original version, keeping in mind that Katie titled the piece right off the bat "Never Enough Time". You can almost hear her running around distractedly as a busy high school senior (PLAY Time #1 measure 1-beginning of 14).

In her first sketch Katie had begun work on a B section, with a theme which was very different from her first theme. In the first version of the piece it was only 3 bars of 7/8 (PLAY Time B idea 1st sketch). Even in this very rudimentary version we can hear that this idea is smoother and more lyrical than the first theme and with a very different rhythmic feel. By the time Katie had made her fourth sketch of the work she had developed this idea so that it was now fully formed. It combined a single line in 7/8 first passed in bits from instrument to instrument in very linear fashion with a version of the line accompanied by chords. Let's listen to some of the final rendition of the piece, first to some of the A section, beginning in bar 15 to pick up some of the interesting and humorous touches Katie has added along the way, and then to her contrasting idea beginning at bar 41 where the chordal section begins (PLAY bars 15-25 then 41-52 fading out in 52 from Opus 16 performance).

In all the pieces we've examined there is one common feature which needs to be mentioned, transitions. A transition may be short or long, but it is essential that there be some logical, organic way to get from one section to another. Now I'm going to contradict what I just said and note that sometimes the most effective transition is no transition at all, merely launching into the new material without any preparation. However, this is a technique best left to experienced composers. A piece with no transitions between sections which doesn't work well sounds choppy and amateurish, so it's better to learn how to combine material from the contrasting themes in some way to help smooth the path and help the listener hear that despite the different ideas it's all one piece.

So let's summarize what we've discussed in this podcast. While using repetition is essential to almost all successful compositions, sometimes using contrasting material can be more effective than using similar themes or themes built from the same material as the original idea. The benefits of this approach are that it makes the original theme stand out even more because of the contrast, changes the mood and creates an element of unpredictability about the piece which keeps the listener attentive. When using contrasting material it is important to make it as interesting as the original theme and to make sure that it is strong enough so it can stand on its own. However, it's also important to make sure it's well-prepared through a transition, is well-placed in the piece and that it's got some sort of relationship with the rest of the piece or it will sound alien. If you can do all that, your piece will sound

both integrated AND interesting, something all composers strive for. Next time we'll talk about constructing a good bass line. I hope you're listening.