

Critical Analysis in the Humanities: Music

This handout is designed for students in the humanities as *well* as those interested in contemplating the nonliterary arts, specifically those who are concerned with reflecting more deeply on music. Intended as a supplement to an instructor's specific requirements, the following information will give the student critic some concepts and terms to consider when analyzing the fine and performing arts in writing critical essays for music appreciation.

As with any other writing assignment for college course work, a critical analysis should follow standard practices in essay mechanics, form, tone, and style.

Some Things to Recognize and Consider when Analyzing Music

1. **Meter:** Is the piece ***metrically regular***? That is, can you count out regular repetitions of two, three, or four beats? Or does the piece not seem to fall into such clear-cut groupings?
2. **Timbre:** What instruments or groups of instruments do you hear? How do the different instruments or groups of instruments function? Do some tend to carry the melody while others primarily provide accompaniment? Or do they trade off, different instruments or groups of instruments functioning differently at different times?
3. **Texture:** Describe whether the piece is ***sparse*** (few instruments sounding at a time) or ***dense*** (many instruments sounding at a time)? Is the piece predominantly ***monophonic, polyphonic, or homophonic***? Does the texture change from section to section in the piece?
4. **Tempo and dynamics:** Are the speed or pace (***tempo***) and the force or intensity (***dynamics***) fairly consistent throughout, or do they shift and change frequently? Such shifts in music are often interpreted as emotional intensifications or relaxations. Are the shifts abrupt, or do they involve gradual risings and subsidings?
5. **Harmony:** Does the ***harmony*** (the combination and progression of musical chords) seem to involve combinations of tones which you are accustomed to, or does the piece seem to involve unusual harmonies or even harsh, unpleasant sound combinations (***dissonance***)?
6. **Melody/Theme:**
 - a. Can you identify a single main ***theme (melody)*** which is repeated at different points in the piece? Is it a melody which is mainly rhythmic in character, or does it seem more *lyrical* or ***"melodic,"*** consisting of a longer, more elaborate succession of tones? When the ***main theme*** is repeated, is it changed? If so, how is it changed?
 - b. Is there ***a second theme*** which you hear? How would you describe the differences between the second theme and the main or first theme? Are there any other identifiable themes or melodies which you can find?
7. **Structure:**

- a. Can you distinguish between sections which have **clearly identifiable themes** and those which do not (for example, transitions and concluding sections which are **rhythmic and harmonic in nature** but which lack clear cut themes)?
 - b. Do the different **themes, transition sections, and concluding sections** fit together to form some kind of **structure** which you can describe? Are there any clear cut **cadences--pauses or** rest points--which suggest that one section of the piece has ended and another is to begin, or does the piece lack strong, clear cadences?
8. What, overall, is the composer attempting to express in the piece? How does each of the elements analyzed above contribute to this expression, this effect? Is the composer's attempt successful? If so, why is it a success; if not, why is it not a success?

TERMS

- **homophonic:** *one melody at a time* with accompaniment, relates like figure and ground--most contemporary music is of this type
- **monophonic:** *a single melody with accompaniment*, for example, a Gregorian chant
- **polyphonic:** a simultaneous combination of a number of independent but harmonizing melodies, for example, a fugue or a canon
- **sonata form:** a structural form typical of much classical music consisting of three parts or movements:
 1. **exposition** (introduction of the main theme)
 2. **development** (of the main theme)
 3. **recapitulation** (restatement of main theme)