

UNIT 15

TEXTURE

The term *texture* in music refers to ways that melody, harmony, and rhythm combine. One of the simplest textures involves a single instrument or voice performing a single melody — one note at a time. But much Western music (and indeed much music in general) is made up of concurrent strands of activity. Various textures arise from the ways these various strands interact.

The textures described in this unit may occur for an entire composition, an entire movement, or simply in a specific passage, which might be preceded, followed, or surrounded by passages exhibiting other textures.

Monophony

When music consists of a single melody without any other strands of activity (no accompaniment, no countermelody, etc.), we say the music is **MONOPHONIC**. We call this condition **MONOPHONY**. This single melodic line may be doubled on the same pitches or at various octaves, but we still consider such conditions to be monophonic. A vocalist singing alone is monophonic, but so is an entire orchestra and chorus playing the same melody at the same time.

MONOPHONIC
music consists of
a single melodic
line.

Here is an excerpt from one of the famous Cello suites by J. S. Bach. This passage is monophonic because the cello is playing only one note at a time:

J. S. Bach, Suite No. 3 for Unaccompanied Cello, BWV 1009, Bourrée I, mm. 1-4 (c1720)



YT

And here is a passage from a symphony by W. A. Mozart, in which many instruments of the orchestra are playing the same melody (doubled at the unison and various octaves):

Fl.
Ob.
Cl.
Fg.
VI. I
VI. II
Vla.
Vcl. o Cb.

f 125 *f* 130

3:38

Biphony

If a single melodic line is joined by another instrument or voice playing a sustained pitch (often called a **DRONE**), then we call music **BIPHONIC**, and refer to the condition as **BIPHONY**. Biphony is distinct from polyphony (discussed below) in that the drone is not a separately distinguishable melody. Most musicians consider the drone to be subordinate to the melody in a biphonic texture.

Here is an example of biphony in 12th-century European sacred music:

A **DRONE** is a sustained pitch that can accompany a melody.

BIPHONIC music consists of a single melodic accompanied by a drone.

Leonin, Propter Veritatem, Audi filia (12th century CE)

YT

Biphony is relatively rare in Western music. It was more common in some Medieval European genres, and is found in certain non-Western musics.

Heterophony

There are times when two (or more) parts perform similar melodic material, but one part plays sparser rhythms while another performs most or all of the same pitches, but with more elaborate rhythms than, and embellishments of the pitches in, the other part. In this way, the more complex part is a kind of variation of the simpler one *performed at the same time*.

HETEROPHONIC music contains one or more parts that elaborate the pitches of another part at the same time.

Here is an example of heterophony from Balinese gamelan music:

Pengcet Lasem, Balinese *legong* dance (excerpt)

[source: Michael S. Tenzer, "Theory and Analysis of Melody in Balinese Gamelan" (*Music Theory Online* 6/2)]

Heterophony is (like biphony) also rather rare in Western music. It does occur, but most often as a part of special orchestral writing in which certain instruments “double” others but with simpler rhythms, playing only certain structural pitches while the parts they double play more elaborate lines. For example, in the following excerpt from a symphony by Joseph Haydn, note how the first oboe plays a reduced version of the melody played by the flute and first violins:¹

Joseph Haydn, Symphony No. 101, mvt. 1, mm. 54-59 (1794)

Presto

Polyphony

If two or more separately distinguishable melodies occur at the same time, we say the music is **POLYPHONIC** and refer to the condition as **POLYPHONY**. To be perceived as polyphonic, the parts must be rhythmically independent. Most musicians consider the separate melodies in polyphonic music to be of relatively equal stature. Polyphony is often quite striking, as its concurrent lines vie for listeners’ attention. Composers often construct polyphonic passages in such a way that the various lines trade prominence from moment to moment. Here is the opening of a fugue from J. S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Note the three separate melodic lines, which enter at the pickups to the first, fifth, and tenth measures:

POLYPHONIC
music consists of
two or more
rhythmically
independent
melodic lines
sounding
concurrently.

¹ In this passage other instruments are also playing, but these parts have been extracted here for the sake of clarity.



YT

We often refer to polyphonic music as being **CONTRPUNTAL** and call such music **COUNTERPOINT**. The term focuses on the relationships between the pitches in the concurrent lines.

COUNTERPOINT is polyphonic music. The term focuses on the relationships between the pitches in the concurrent lines.

Homophony

There is another musical texture that's not quite as clearly defined as the ones we've discussed so far. It comes in two varieties, each of which we'll discuss here. When music exhibits either of the kinds of characteristics below, we say that the music is **HOMOPHONIC**, and call the condition **HOMOPHONY**.

Homorhythmic Homophony (Pure Homophony)

When multiple parts all move in the same rhythm, we say that the music is **HOMORHYTHMIC**. When homorhythmic parts are performing different pitches, we call the condition **HOMORHYTHMIC HOMOPHONY**.² In this version of homophony, all parts perform identical (or nearly identical) rhythms.

In **HOMORHYTHMIC** music, all parts perform the same rhythms (but not necessarily the same pitches).

In the following excerpt, notice how all four voice parts (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) move in nearly exactly the same rhythms (with two small exceptions in measures 10 and 11):

In **HOMORHYTHMIC HOMOPHONY**, music, all parts perform the same rhythms on different pitches.

² Homorhythmic parts all doubling the same melody would be *monophonic* (see above).

Praise God, from whom all bless-ings flow; Praise him, all crea-tures here be - low; Praise

35-13

him a - bove, ye heav'n - ly host: Praise Fath - er, Son, and Ho - ly Ghost.

Melody and Accompaniment

Another version of homophony occurs when one of the parts (usually the highest) performs a melody distinct from, and often with more active rhythms than, the other parts. This distinct part is commonly referred to as *the melody*, and the other parts as *the accompaniment*, and this type of homophony is often called **MELODY AND ACCOMPANIMENT**.

In **MELODY AND ACCOMPANIMENT** homophony, most parts (the accompaniment) perform the same rhythms on different pitches except for one part, which distinguishes itself as the melody.

Here's an example in which the accompaniment is entirely homorhythmic while the melody offers more contour and rhythmic activity:

Lively ♩ = 126 (♩ = 378) Dave Brubeck, "Blue Rondo a la Turk," mm. 1-4

Praise God, from whom all bless-ings flow; Praise him, all crea-tures here be - low; Praise

75-04

Sometimes, the accompaniment can exhibit several strands of activity in itself:

W. A. Mozart, Trio in E, K. 542, mmt. 3, mm. 121-128

The image shows a musical score for Violin and Piano. The Violin part is in the upper staff, marked *Allegro* and *p*. It begins at measure 121 with a melodic line. The Piano part is in the lower staves, also marked *p*. It features a complex accompaniment with multiple strands of activity, including a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more active bass line in the left hand. The key signature is E major (three sharps) and the time signature is common time (C).

In some passages the accompaniment exhibits more rhythmic activity than the melody — often using figuration to arpeggiate through the pitches of the chords, as in the *Alberti bass* seen here:

W. A. Mozart, Piano Sonata K. 545, mvt. 1, mm. 1-4 (1788)

The image shows a musical score for Piano Sonata K. 545, measures 1-4. The tempo is marked *Allegro*. The score is in common time (C) and E major. The right hand plays a simple melodic line, while the left hand plays a classic *Alberti bass* pattern, which is a rhythmic figure that arpeggiates the notes of the chords. A trill (tr) is indicated in the right hand at the end of the fourth measure.

YT

Relative Motion Between Parts

Western musicians often describe relative motion between parts. When two parts match one another's contour in a precise step-to-step and skip-to-skip fashion, then we say the parts are moving in **PARALLEL MOTION**.

Two parts move in **PARALLEL MOTION** when they exactly match each others contour, step for step and skip for skip.

In the following excerpt the violins all begin on a unison, but once the first violins ascend to a third above the second violins (C–E on the second beat), the two parts move in parallel thirds through the rest of the excerpt:

George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*, HWV 56, No. 13, Pifa mm. 1-3 (1741)

Larghetto e mezzo piano

YT

When two parts match one another's contour in more imprecise ways (following the general up-and-down motion, but not matching steps and skips precisely), we say the parts are moving in **SIMILAR MOTION**.

Two parts move in **SIMILAR MOTION** when they match each others contour in a general way (less precisely than in parallel motion).

Here's an example of two parts moving in similar motion. Notice how the upper part moves in an entirely stepwise fashion, but the lower voice — while matching the up-and-down contour of the upper voice — moves at times in larger intervals (fourths and thirds) and at other times in steps:

Ludwig van Beethoven, Piano Concerto No. 5, Op. 73 ("Emperor"), mmt. 1, mm. 48-56 (1809)

Allegro

When two move in opposite contours — when one part moves up as the other moves down (and vice versa) — we say the parts are moving in **CONTRARY MOTION**.

Two parts move in **CONTRARY MOTION** when they move in opposite contours.

In the following excerpt, the voices in the passages enclosed in rectangles are moving in contrary motion:

J. S. Bach, Invention No. 6, BWV 777, mm. 1-9 (c1720)

00:09

And when one part remains on a single pitch while the other moves freely, we say the parts are moving in **OBLIQUE MOTION**.

Two parts move in **OBLIQUE MOTION** when one remains on a single pitch while the other moves freely.

Johann Kuhnau, *Magnificat*, mm. 1-3

A sustained passage exhibiting oblique motion would result in a kind of biphony.

The Effects of Rhythm on Texture

What we've discussed thus far is a classic taxonomy of musical texture. This taxonomy includes the three main textures monophony, polyphony, and homophony, plus the more rare textures biphony and heterophony. These textures are defined by the relationships among the various strands of musical activity at any time. But our perception of musical texture is also affected by rhythmic activity — in individual parts, and the aggregate rhythms produced by all the parts together.

In general, we tend to think of passages with greater rhythmic activity as being *denser*, *thicker*, or even *heavier*. In contrast, passages with less rhythmic activity strike us as *sparser*, *thinner*, or even *lighter*.

For example, notice how the following excerpt is entirely homorhythmic for the first four measures, but then the accompanying instruments (violin II, viola, and cello) break away from the melody instrument (violin I), then introduce more rhythmic activity in measure 6. Many musicians would say that the texture in measure 6 is denser because of this.

Allegro W. A. Mozart, Quintet K. 581 ("Clarinet Quintet"), mmt. 1, mm. 1-7 (1789)

The musical score shows four staves: Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked 'Allegro'. The first four measures are homorhythmic, with all instruments playing quarter notes. In measure 6, the Violino I continues with a melodic line, while Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello play eighth notes, creating a denser texture. A trill (tr) is marked above the final note of the Violino I staff in measure 7.

35-15

The Effects of Spacing on Texture

One other factor that affects our impression of musical texture is spacing (or voicing). In general, the more pitches that occupy a given pitch space, the denser the texture. Therefore, we will tend to perceive the following chord as sparse:

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The chord consists of three notes: G4 (first line), B4 (second space), and D5 (third space). The notes are widely spaced, illustrating a sparse texture.

Whereas we will tend to perceive the following chord as dense:



In addition, any given spacing will tend to sound sparse or clear if it's placed higher in pitch space:



But it will sound relatively dense if it is placed lower in pitch space:



Close spacing sounds so muddled in low registers that composers tend to space chord members farther apart in low registers and closer together in upper registers. Here is a classic example:

Largo

7

p

01:03

Texture as a Rhetorical Device

Many composers have used texture as a kind of rhetorical device and a way of signaling where we are in a composition. For example, in many classical symphonies and sonatas, the transitions between main theme areas are often much denser in texture than the theme areas themselves. (And this denseness is often produced as much by greater rhythmic activity as it is by adding instruments and strands of activity.) In classical operas, the recitatives exhibit much sparser textures than the other sections. And in much Western popular songs, choruses (especially those later in a song) are often engineered with denser texture, bringing the song to a textural climax of sorts.

* * *

The most common textures in Western music are monophony, polyphony, and homophony. Bipphony and heterophony are not nearly as common in Western music, but do occur much more often in some non-Western musics.

Keep in mind that — although there are many compositions that exhibit a single texture throughout their length— Western compositions often make use of a variety of textures over time, moving either suddenly or gradually between textures as the music progresses.

Exercises

(1) Choose the term that best describes the texture of the following excerpt.

(a) heterophonic (b) polyphonic (c) monophonic (d) homophonic (e) biphonic

W. A. Mozart, German Dance K. 605, No. 3, mm. 1-4 (1791)

The musical score consists of four staves. The top three staves are in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The music is in G major. The texture is homophonic, with a single melodic line in the upper staves and a supporting bass line. The dynamics are marked 'f' (forte) throughout.

(2) Choose the term that best describes the texture of the following excerpt.

(a) heterophonic (b) polyphonic (c) monophonic (d) homophonic (e) biphonic

Moderato

Peter Tchaikovsky, Sixteen Children's Songs, Op. 54, No. 5, "Legend," mm. 9-12

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system is a vocal line in treble clef, 2/4 time, with lyrics: "When Je - sus was a lit - tle child". The dynamics are marked 'mf' and 'p'. The second system is a piano accompaniment in grand staff (treble and bass clefs), 2/4 time. The texture is homophonic. The dynamics are marked 'mp' and 'p'.

(3) Which of the following excerpts is polyphonic?

(a)

J. S. Bach, Suite No. 2 for Unaccompanied Cello, BWV 1008, Gigue, mm. 1-4 (c1720)



(b)

Allegro vivace

Ludwig van Beethoven, Piano Sonata No. 16, Op. 31, No. 1, mvt. 1, mm. 66-73 (1802)

Musical notation for measures 66-73 of the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 16, Op. 31, No. 1. The piece is in 2/4 time and D major. The notation shows two staves: the right hand has a melodic line and the left hand has a bass line with chords. The tempo is marked 'Allegro vivace' and the dynamics include a piano (*p*) marking.

(c)

J. S. Bach, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I,
Fugue in G minor (No. 16), BWV 861, mm. 1-6 (1722)

Musical notation for the first six measures of the Fugue in G minor, BWV 861, from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I. The piece is in 4/4 time and G minor. The notation shows two staves: the right hand has a melodic line and the left hand has a bass line with chords. The piece is a fugue, characterized by its polyphonic texture.

— continues on next page —

(d)

Charles Ives, *Psalm XXIV*, mm. 22-27 (c1913)

The musical score is arranged in four staves for voices and piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The piano part is in the bass clef. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 22-27, and the second system covers measures 25-27. The lyrics are: "He shall re-ceive the bless-ing from the Lord, and right-eous-ness from the God of his sal-va-tion." The dynamic marking *mf* is present at the beginning of each vocal line. The time signature changes from 4/4 to 3/4 and back to 4/4. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

22 *mf*
Soprano He shall re-ceive the bless-ing from the Lord, and
Alto *mf*
He shall re-ceive the bless-ing from the Lord, and
Tenor *mf*
He shall re-ceive the bless-ing from the Lord, and
Bass *mf*
He shall re-ceive the bless-ing from the Lord, and

25
right-eous-ness from the God of his sal-va-tion.
right-eous-ness from the God of his sal-va-tion.
right-eous-ness from the God of his sal-va-tion.
right-eous-ness from the God of his sal-va-tion.