

Guidelines for Analysis
John H. Morrison

The purpose of analysis is to identify the primary musical elements which give shape to a piece, to describe the operations of those factors in conjunction with one another, and to yield an account of shape or form based upon the features described. Toward those ends, the most powerful tool one has is repeated, focused listening. The method outlined here admits for equal emphasis on the various musical parameters, and is thus ideal for twentieth-century music; it is just as valuable for the music of earlier times, but the analysis of pitch must obviously fit prescribed patterns in older music. The basic idea is this: what makes a piece *work*? The answer is not always to be found in manipulations of pitch!

The process:

- 1) Listen at least once, and preferably two to three times, to the complete work. Do not attempt to write during early listenings, but simply absorb as much of the whole as possible. It is advisable to listen without a score for at least the first time through a piece.
- 2) After a few listenings, sketch out the overall shape of the piece. It is recommended that one record observations on a blank sheet of paper, horizontally oriented, leaving plenty of space to fill in details later on. Devising a set of symbols for marking your score can be valuable at this stage as well. Determine the number of sections, and how those are formed. Unified content of one sort or another will define sections; change in some structural parameter or other will signal new sections. Further listening will probably be necessary to complete this step: your main goal here is to identify those parameters which most strongly reinforce the sectionality you are hearing.
- 3) Work toward a more detailed account of the individual sections. At this point, one ought to be fairly diligent in recognizing and describing the presence of all parameters, at least on a minimal level. Those which undergo change (or significantly do not!), seem inter-related or especially important need to be dealt with more thoroughly. This is the most time-consuming step, and the one which will produce most of your insight into the piece. Do not hurry! Choose an important parameter, then trace it (analyze its patterns) through the entire piece. Make a diagram of its energy contour, which is how its patterns raise energy level and in turn disperse energy. Pitch materials can be the most difficult to untangle, and one must do so. Identifying what is true about the pitch is a good starting point, and considering its energy contribution at each stage of existence is a good way to proceed. Beginning with other parameters can often reveal goals of progressions and so forth, helping to unravel the mysteries, so it is often advisable to begin with other features than pitch.
- 4) Bring together your observations, consider the large-scale patterns produced. Organize your thoughts to forge and support a thesis which states what you have found to be the organizational principles at work. Especially put effort into discerning an energy contour for each parameter, and attempt to account for the interaction of parameters over time. If proceeding to write a paper as a result of your analysis, the thesis and opening paragraph of the essay will frame your work: it should lay out clearly the most important parameters shaping the piece, briefly explain your reasons for choosing those factors, and describe the shape or form which results. The body of the paper can then be fairly descriptive of events, but still be careful not to string along too much description without pausing to remind the reader of the point you are making about the shape of the work with that description.

The items to listen for, listed on the reverse, are essentially those structural parameters outlined by Spencer and Temko in their text, *A Practical Approach to the Study of Musical Form*. All are basically musical parameters capable of producing shape. One may also listen for particular formal paradigms, such as binary, ternary, rondo, etc. It is also advisable to ponder how cadence is produced in a given composition.

For every item listed here, you should ask yourself how important the parameter is, whether it is the source of a progression from one relative extreme to another, and whether there exists a recognizable pattern of change in a given parameter. Any of those questions may apply between or within sections. Ultimately, one may generally estimate (or quantify) the contribution of a given parameter to the total energy flow of a section or piece, and then attempt to describe the totality of energy manipulation which is the essence of the piece or movement.

pitch materials: possible descriptive terms:

quartal/quintal, clusters, diatonic (in a key), modal, pandiatonic, unusual tunings (microtones, just intonation, etc.), any other term you know or can devise

density: vertical

Is the vertical arrangement of lines or chord members extremely dense or sparse? Is there an identifiable method to the spacing?

density: horizontal

Is the music horizontally dense or sparse? Is the density contained in a single part, many parts, or is it a "composite" density (wherein no single part is dense, but the number of individual articulations active in a given time is high nonetheless)?

dynamics

fairly obvious; the key is relation of dynamics to other factors

range, tessitura

How are high points, low points reached/treated? Is there a general "lie" to a melody or section (i.e., tessitura)?

meter

regular, alternating, asymmetrical, non-discernible, metric modulation, etc.?

rhythm

polyrhythm, syncopation, etc.

melodic (linear): aligned with meter or irregular? recurring motive(s)?

harmonic: what is the general rate of harmonic change?

any factor can carry rhythmic patterning!

melody

recurrent themes or subjects, variations, etc.

characteristic intervals (motive), general scope (range/tessitura)

Are there tendencies of melodic construction present (especially in conjunction with rhythm, range, and harmony)?

timbre

Is there a describable sound quality present? Details of orchestration are timbral features; do they carry structural importance? For many instruments, remember that range affects timbre drastically.

articulation

dry, staccato, legato, crisp, pungent, heavy, etc.

texture

monophonic, heterophonic, polyphonic

polyphonic:

homophonic (block chordal movement, voice leading produces lines)

contrapuntal (independent lines, no imitation)

imitative (contrapuntal with imitation)

canonic (extensive imitation of leader by follower; may be accompanied)

fugal (single subject passed to all voices)

cadence (not really a parameter, but a statement of how action in a parameter produces cadence)

What produces it? Largest concept: something different happens.