

Composition Workshop

Assignment #4: a single motif with variation

Write a short melodic piece that is based on a single motif that is then varied through a series of phrases.

Motive (motif)

A motive (sometimes referred to in the French: *motif*) is a melodic fragment that is repeated or varied to form a full melody, theme, or phrase. Motives are established by continued use; a group of notes that is not repeated is not a motive. The end of a motive is marked by either 1) its immediate repetition, 2) a rest, or 3) contrasting material. Usually, the repetition of a motive immediately follows its first appearance. Occasionally, contrasting material may forestall the repetition—but the motive will always be heard again at a later point in time.

Motive Examples With Subsequent Variation

Beethoven: Symphony No. 5, Op. 67 (1808)



Sonny Rollins: Tenor Madness (1956)



This third example is a primarily rhythmic-based motive...

Beethoven: Symphony No. 7, Op. 92 (1812)



Because a motive is usually very short, the bigger challenge is to come up with creative ways of applying variation so that the motive carefully transforms, but not so much so quickly that the listener loses track of the original idea. If you listen to recordings of the above examples, you will hear how each motive retains its essence as the music evolves.

The suggested assignment is to:

- Write a melody approximately four phrases long (a phrase is usually anything from two to four measures long).
- The first phrase will contain the motive and probably a variation of it.
- The subsequent phrases should vary and develop your motivic idea.
- By the end of the last phrase, make sure your melody comes to a satisfying conclusion.

Typical ways to apply variation to a motive are to:

- Sequence it by moving the pitches higher or lower, but maintain the same contour/shape and rhythm
- Maintain the same contour/shape, but change the rhythm
- Maintain the same rhythm, but change the notes (i.e. the contour)
- Make some of the notes longer and/or shorter
- Make the motive go in reverse (known as "retrograde")
- Change the direction of the motive (if the original goes up, the variation goes down, etc.)
- Reuse only a fraction of the motive if it is long enough to be split into small parts