VCE Music Advice for teachers 2017–2022

Cross-study specifications resources – examples and further information

Elements of music

The elements of music, depending on the style being studied, may be analysed with reference to:

* Structure/form – the design of a work or section: for example, large-scale or global structures such as symphonies, dance suites, and operas; medium-scale structures such as twelve-bar blues, sixteen and thirty-two bar song form, verse/ chorus, strophic, sonata form, binary, ternary, rondo, theme and variations, through-composed, fugue, round, canon, cantus firmus, metrical and/or harmonic cycles; small-scale/micro structures such as motives and motivic development, phrasing, chord patterns, textural components, modulatory systems.
* Instrumentation – the instruments/sound sources used to realise the music; for example, the list of instruments/sound sources (including digital and electronic instruments) used.
* Tone colour – the quality of an instrumental, vocal or group sound/s; for example, the effect of the way in which the instruments/sound sources are used and the effect of techniques employed; combinations of instruments used at various stages in the work or excerpt; particular instrumental techniques employed such as muting, pizzicato, *glissandi, flutter tonguing; production techniques such as reverb, chorus, distortion.*
* Texture – the ways in which music parts and voices are combined and layered; for example, layers of sound (contrapuntal, polyphonic, chordal, homophonic, monophonic, heterophonic, pointillistic, unison); the density of sound (from light/thin to heavy/thick); tessitura (effect of pitch height on texture).
* Tonality – the hierarchical organisation of pitch (commonly referred to as the scale) upon which a composition or section of a composition is based; for example, modal, diatonic (major/minor – functional), pentatonic, polytonal, whole tone, chromatic, atonal, serial.
* Harmony – the vertical organisation of pitch; this may also refer to relationships between chords or use of chords in a progressive combination (i.e. chord progression); for example, triads, triadic extensions, cluster chords, organum, vertical pitch combinations and the interrelationship of chords (functional or non-functional), modulation, ostinato, harmonic rhythm (rate of harmonic change per bar), pitch centres.
* Melody, the horizontal organisation of pitch (i.e. the tune); for example, tunes, tone rows, themes, horizontal pitch patterns and the characteristics of a melody such as intervals, phrasing, tessitura, shape/contour, motives and, where appropriate, influence of text.
* Rhythm/time – the horizontal organisation of sounds into patterns according to duration; for example, meter/time signature, pulse, length of notes, tempo, rhythmic motives and rhythmic devices such as syncopation, ostinato, augmentation/diminution, polymeters and cross rhythms.
* Meter – the organisation of rhythm into repeating patterns of stressed and unstressed beats, for example, simple, compound, duple, triple, compound, asymmetric/complex, pulse, additive, divisive, hypermeter.
* Tempo – the speed of the beat, for example fast, lively, slow, very slow, languid, 72 beats/minute, andante, presto, feel, in 1, in 3.
* Dynamics – the relative volume or intensity of a sound/s or note/s, soft, loud, getting louder, getting softer, piano, forte, crescendo, diminuendo.
* Articulation – the attack, release and decay of the sound; for example, staccato marcato, legato, sforzando, strong, light.

Compositional devices

Compositional devices are intrinsically linked to the treatment of the elements of music. They are used to create the musical parameters and internal structures that determine the fundamental shape and character of a composition. They may be seen at the:

* Global level – devices used to create large-scale forms and differentiation between major sections of a work. Compositional devices at the global level may occur in relation to the treatment of all the elements of music, individually and in combination. They may also involve specific devices at the lower level/s.
* Medium level – devices used to create development within a major section of a work.
* Micro level – devices used to create development within phrases, motifs, cells, bars and/or units.

Composers and performers use compositional devices individually and in combination to create coherence, unity and diversity in music works and interpretations. The variety of compositional devices used by composers may be categories as examples of repetition (where a musical pattern is established and used again in its original form), variation (where an established pattern is used again but with modification), contrast (where significant new musical material is introduced or where significant changes are made to established musical patterns).

Examples of devices used at global, medium and micro level may include, for example:

**Repetition**

* Global – repeating whole sections - entire formal sections, repeating sections within a form (ABA etc.), a repeating harmonic framework.
* Medium – repeating melodic lines or phrases, melodic shapes, harmonic patterns.
* Micro – repeating intervals, motifs, riffs, ostinati.

**Variation**

* Global – where variation is embedded in the overall form/structure of the work, for example, theme and variation.
* Medium – modulation, re-orchestration, re-harmonising, addition/subtraction of melodic lines, rhythmic accompaniment, instruments or layers of sound, use of sequence, changing to a new key area.
* Micro – variation of small scale structures such as beat, bar or phrase level, variation in rhythmic feel, variation of motifs, variation of contour in motifs, change in articulation or dynamics on repetitions of small scale patterns, shifting a melodic pattern to a new starting pitch, adding ornaments, expanding or contracting intervals in a melody, retaining melodic contour but changing pitches, tempo changes (gradual or sudden), adding or removing rubato or metrical changes, using a rhythmic figure in different places within the bar.

**Contrast**

* Global – contrast can be an inherent feature of the form/structure, for example, ABA, different movements in a multi-part work, fully notated/pre-known with improvised sections, for example the ‘head’ and improvised sections in a jazz work.
* Medium – changes to orchestration, melodic shapes and registers, rhythms, meters, harmonies, textures, articulation and forms; modulation, re-orchestration and the addition or subtraction of layers, adding harmonic accompaniment, adding or subtracting melodic lines or layers of sound, re-orchestration, and sound effects.
* Micro – can include immediate changes relating to one or more elements of music such as dynamics - stabs, stingers, forte pianos, shifting a melodic pattern to a new starting pitch, adding ornaments, expanding or contracting intervals in a melody, retaining melodic contour but changing pitches, tempo variations (gradual or sudden such as ritenuto or ritardando), adding or removing rubato or metrical changes, using a rhythmic figure in different places within the bar.

Conventions

Conventions are often style, genre or instrument specific, for example, improvisation in jazz styles, figured bass in Baroque works, lead drum calls in the music of Ghana, guitar effects and distortion in rock styles, sampling and editing techniques in techno music. Other conventions relate to expected behaviours of both performers and audience for example, the formality and silence within a concert hall setting, applause at the end of solos in many jazz styles, dramatic flair and aggression within heavy metal, the structure of a North Indian raga performance in three parts. Conventions may also relate to expectations about the scope and formatting of information provided, for example, on a music score, about a recording or to identify an ensemble.

Critical response

Critical responses to music are formed as a result of critical listening. Following are examples of critical responses:

* The driving, energetic feeling evoked in the Police song ‘Synchronicity’ is created by the rapid, consistent regular rhythms of the hi-hat and kick drum aligned with the unison rhythm of the bass.
* The lush, rich and lyrical atmosphere of the final theme of Gershwin’s ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ is achieved by the use of unison, legato full string orchestration.

The adjectives in these two examples – ‘driving, energetic’ and ‘lush, rich and lyrical’ – are subjective responses to music. The analytical information is given in the statements ‘the rapid, consistent regular rhythms of the hi-hat and kick drum aligned with the unison rhythm of the bass’ and ‘unison, legato full string orchestration’.