

How to make your composition more rhythmically interesting

*The ideas contained in this worksheet are to provide you with a little scope of the manner in which your composition can be made more interesting rhythmically, but at the same time, the tasks have also been geared to allowing you to experiment with **variation technique**, therefore allowing you to experiment further with your understanding of simple form in musical composition. However, you may also use the tasks as 'stand-alone' rhythm exercises, ignoring the form aspect.*

Sometimes, when we write music, we are unaware that a few simple alterations can do much to improve our efforts. These are often to do with harmony: the use of a different chord or sequence, for example, can do much to change the whole atmosphere of the piece. Often, however, rhythm and rhythmic devices are left unchanged, and with just a little imagination, you can make your composition come to life in a manner you thought impossible.

In the early stages of learning to be a composer, students often restrict their use of rhythm to crotchets, quavers, semiquavers etc., without much thought to varying these. This is understandable, since there are so many things to think about that the effect of rhythm often remains unnoticed.

Let's look at a simple melody.

Example 1

This is a folk song from Norway that is popular there as a hymn. And as a hymn melody, it is perfectly suitable: the movement is in crotchets and minims; very the melody is interesting and easily within the range of most singers; the harmonies suggested by the melody are strong, which in the case of singing, is supportive; the melody is in a minor key, which people often find easier to sing.

But if it were to be used as the basis for an instrumental composition, it isn't really terribly interesting, since it has a tendency to plod along, without any real variation in its rhythmic movement.

What could be done to improve it? Well, simple things, such as the use of dotted notes might do something, as in the following example.

Example 2

The alteration of a few note pairs from crotchets to dotted-crotchet – quaver units has done much to make the melody more interesting. You will notice, however, that these alterations have been made only occasionally at the beginning. Later, though, between bars 9 and 12, the rhythmic unit has been used sequentially, and this gives the music more of a sense of cohesion.

This all seems quite obvious and you might wonder why you have even bothered to read and study something that you would probably do naturally. However, this is just the first stage of an exercise that I hope will enable you to transform your melody to

something more interesting. In the course of the next few paragraphs, your task will be to see how varying the rhythm later in your composition, will enable you to develop a slightly large-scale work with a sense of balance that is often missed by fledgling composers.

Write your melody or, since in this case you are beginning to compose a set of variations, your *theme*; if you have not used the first series of worksheets in this series, which deal with melodic composition, it might be a good idea to begin with these, as they contain valuable information that, in the course of your studies, will enable you to write a stronger composition. Given the nature of the finished work, it is perhaps best to make sure that your melody is relatively short, perhaps eight or twelve bars' length.

As you plan it, try to ensure that the music follows the following rubric:

1. Keep the rhythmic movement fairly simple, using crotchets and minims, etc.
2. To create interest, include a modulation to the dominant somewhere, but make sure that you end in the same key in which you began.

When you are satisfied with it, make a copy of it and begin to vary the rhythm slightly (remember that in the first part of this worksheet we discussed that repeating rhythmic units as a sequence helps to provide the music with sense of 'belonging' or cohesion). You have your first *variation*.

When you are satisfied with this, make another copy but this time begin to decorate the melody with passing notes of varying rhythmic complexities. An important thing to note here concerns your variation's content, since if you begin to build on the previous example, there is the chance that your composition might become a little confused or untidy. Therefore, use the theme rather than your first variation.

You can see from the following example how I have developed this idea. If we take the first example as my theme and the second example as my first variation, the following becomes the second variation.

Example 3

Here you can see that a few things have occurred:

1. The added notes keep well within the key.
2. The ornamentation does not happen throughout the variation. In fact, I have reverted to the original rhythm and melody in bars 2, 6, 8 – 9 and 15. This helps the listener to identify the variation with the theme.
3. I have also used some rhythms from the previous variation as well (bars 11 – 12) which provide a sense of unity with the previous variation.

This is a system you can continue to use to develop further variations. However, it would be useful for you to experiment with some of the following ideas:

1. Use of rhythmic alteration, that is, augmentation and diminution. These are techniques used by composers from the earliest times until today. Essentially, this means doubling or halving note values, as in the following example:

Example 4

Here you will see that by extending the notes' length, I have truncated the melody a little, so that bars 1 – 4 correspond to bars 1-2 of the theme. I have missed out bars 3 – 6 of the theme, augmenting bars 7 – 8 instead (with a slight modification to the theme as well). Similarly, bars 9 – 12 of the example correspond to bars 11 – 12 of the theme. The final four bars of the variation relate to the final two bars of the theme (here, you will notice, that to fit everything I wanted into the variation, I have had to extend the melody by two bars).

Similar techniques can be used for diminution. Here though, it might be a good idea to extend the melody, since, whereas extending your composition's length is quite acceptable, contracting it may make the variation somewhat short.

Example 5

The example provides you with the first part of the melody as a demonstration. You will notice that bars 2 – 3 contain new material, which has been added to extend out the melody, allow you to develop a series of other harmonies or accompanying figuration, should you be writing for more than a solo instrument. However, this additional material contains all the notes of the theme, which here are marked with an x.

2. The use of silence. Too often, as composers, we forget the effect that a simple rest has on the music. In the following example, which shows the beginning of another variation, you will see that I have followed the first note with a crotchet and quaver rest, and completed the bar with the remaining notes of the corresponding bar of the theme in diminution. The same technique has been used in bar three, with the remaining material being nothing but melodic decorations of the harmony.

Example 6

Other things that you should consider might include the following:

1. A change of metre, taking a melody, for example, in common time to triple time.
2. The use of triplets, duplets, etc.

3. Changing the range of your melody: the examples here fall roughly within the notes of the staff. However, by taking a variation up or down an octave, you are providing the listener with the ability to hear another aspect of your instrument.
4. Using a related key: as with binary and tertiary forms, there is no reason why you cannot begin a variation in another key. Using a related key is recommended, but if you want to be daring, there is no reason why you should not start in any key of choice. It depends on the effect you are trying to create.
5. Changing the speed. Often, we think in terms of only one speed for a composition, without exploring the mood-shift that can be created by altering this: a *moderato* melody tends to give rise to moderato variations, etc. But imagine the effect if one of your variations becomes an *adagio* or a *vivace*.
6. Altering the accompanying harmonies. If your variations are for several instruments, or a piano or organ, try to fit into the accompaniment differing harmonies to provide the music with more interest.
7. Changing the accompanying figuration. Never use the same accompanying figuration, since this will ensure that the music is rarely interesting. Instead, think about what sort of accompanying figure suits the figuration you have written. For example, longer note values are perhaps more suited to variations where the rhythmic movement is slower; similarly, quicker note values are more suited to those where the movement is swifter.

Recapitulation: There are all manner of things that you can do with your variation writing that will make it more interesting rhythmically. With many of the aspects featured here, this will also have an effect not only on the melodic interest but also, for those who want to take in the later suggestions, harmonic interest. The fun thing about variation technique is that the composition is finished only when you want it to be: Handel and Beethoven, for example, were renowned for writing sets that lasted in excess of 50 differing treatments of the same theme. Similarly, when you have a complete set, you are able also to determine if you want to exclude variations that do not live up to your expectations without damaging the overall structure or feeling.