

Compositional Devices

Composers usually begin with fairly short and simple musical ideas for their compositions. When you get a good melody, rhythm or chord progression for a piece of music, what do you do with it? The answer is: develop it!

Development is the key to creating pieces of music. Development of a rhythm, a melody or even part of a melody, a few chords, some interesting sounds— whatever is at your disposal. The compositional devices I'm going to tell you about are general enough to be applied to almost any musical starting point.

The twin to Development is *Variation*. Where Development might involve taking musical components apart and reworking them separately, Variation tends to leave the musical structures intact, but to alter the “skin” through embellishment, and surface alterations.

If the techniques don't seem to fit with your situation, then experiment with them and see if they don't produce some useful possibilities.

Development

Repetition: repeat the melody or motive

Diatonic Transposition: repeat the melody or motive on a different scale degree

Chromatic transposition: repeat the melody or motive in a different key

Extension: Add a new section to the melody

Elision: Overlap a repetition of a motive during the melody

Fragmentation: Divide the melody up into motives to be developed separately

Intervallic change: expand or contract certain melodic intervals

Condensation: Shorten the melody by leave parts of it out

Augmentation: make melody note values longer

Diminution: make melody note values shorter

Retrograde: play the melody backwards

Inversion: play the melody “upside down”

Retrograde-Inversion: play the melody upside down and backwards

Truncation: omit the first part of the melody, and play starting on a note inside the melody, or play the melody, omitting the end of the melody.

Variation

Ornamentation: State melody adding non-harmonic notes

passing tones;

auxiliary tones;

appoggiatuae;

tied notes;

suspensions, etc.

Rhythmic alteration: change the melody's note values without changing their order

Simplification: reduce non-structural melodic pitches, using few more than the “fundamental” ([urlinie](#)) tones, etc.

[text created by Timothy Sullivan]