Cleveland State University

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MUSICAL SYNTAX (Music vs. Human Language)

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/daniel_rager/37/
MUSICAL SYNTAX
(A Non-musical explanation for both non-musicians and musicians)

MUSICAL LANGUAGE
Vs.
HUMAN SPEECH LANGUAGE

by
Professor Dan Rager

Created for the Dr. Rager 2016 Lecture Series at CSU
MUSICAL SYNTAX

MUSIC vs LANGUAGE

• Note = Letter
• Scale = Alphabet

? 

Assumption that all notes are equal, However…

Whose notes and what alphabet are we to use?

The twelve (12) NOTE chromatic ⅛ step system in the Western world is NOT the same as the five (5) NOTE Chinese Pentatonic scale or Quarter tone systems of the Eastern world.

What Alphabet do we employ?
Exam: Arabic, English, German, Russian, Spanish....

Arabic = 28 letters
English = 26 letters
German = 30 letters
Russian = 33 letters
Spanish = 29 letters
1) Phrase
- unit of musical meter that makes a complete musical sense of its own, built from figures & motifs
- A musical sentence, in part or complete
- phrases can be any length but are often four bars or measures long culminating (ending) in more or less some type of cadence (Perfect / Half / Deceptive)

2) Word
- Smallest free form
- Shortest form of a phrase. Adding words can create a phrase.

Rhythm = Pattern (Word Flow)

1) Rhythm
- Any measured flow or movement
- Symmetry = compositional “form” (ABA / ABCAB) etc.
- Regulated succession of strong and weak elements

2) Pattern
- Regular & irregular flow of words
- Sentence structure and word accents (strong/weak)
- Form (style) of writing
Section = Clause

1) Section
- A portion of a movement that culminates into one or more phrases
- Can be complete (final) or incomplete (Ex. Half cadence)

2) Clause
- In grammar, a **clause** is a pair or group of words that consist of a subject and a predicate
- For the simple sentence "Jane [is pink]," Jane acts as the subject, and pink acts as the predicate

Movement = Sentence

1) Movement
- A musical section (A, B, C etc.) that is part of a larger developed work (Ex. Sonata form)
- It may be defined as a period containing two or more phrases that stand alone, most frequently ending with some form of cadence. A movement consists of a phrase with a repeated motive followed by a continuation phrase which ends in either a half cadence or an authentic cadence
- Is usually in a related key, dominant (V) or relative major or minor
- Beethoven Symphony No. 5 / 1st Mvt. in ‘c’ minor, 2nd Mvt. Ab Major, 3rd Mvt. in ‘c’ minor, 4th Mvt. in “C” Major

2) Sentence
- A sentence includes words grouped meaningfully ‘together’ to express a statement, question, exclamation.
- Contains action symbols that indicate sentence starts, stops, pauses, etc.
- Contain properties distinct to natural language, such as characteristic intonation (pitch) and timing patterns (rhythm)
Colours of Saratov

Movement 2
for French Horn Solo
F Horn transposed into F Major

MUSICAL SYNTAX

"ABA"
Section A

Prefix
3 note motive
End Phrase 1 / sentence

End Phrase 2

Prefix
Elongation of thematic motif moving upward
Rhythmic & Melodic Augmentation
Phrase = Word Extension

Prefix
Elongation of thematic motif moving upward
Compound Interval M6 & P5
End of Section "A"

B Section

F minor

Counterpoint

(3 note Motive)
Section A’
Return to key of F Major
Recapitulation

Prefix

Recapitulation

Elongation of thematic motif moving upward

Elongation of thematic motif moving upward
Compound Interval M6 & P5
Musical example taken from concerto No. 1, (Colours of Saratov) by Dan Rager. Recording available.