

Guide to Analysis of Music

Medium

Why did the composer choose this instrumentation (orchestration)? Is the instrumentation traditional to the style? Are there voices? What are the “colors” of sounds you hear? Do the instruments or voices sound like they are in the extremes of their ranges? Are they bright or brittle sounding? Are they warm and dark sounding?

Meter, Tempo, Rhythm

Can you find the "heartbeat" of the music? How many "weak" beats are there between "strong" beats? Does this piece remind you of a dance? If so, what kind? What is the speed of the music? Does the speed change? Does the speed affect the way the music feels? Is there a prevalent rhythmic feature that recurs? Can you clap or sing it? Can you describe it another way? Is there ever a rhythmic or dance like character to the accompaniment (melodic support)? Can you describe it?

Harmony

What is the “emotional” content of the music? Why do you think so – cite examples from the piece to support your conclusion. Is the way the chords move easy to anticipate? Do notes ever jar against each other? Does the accompaniment sound "open" (notes spaced far apart) or close (notes close together)? Where are the "tense" moments in the music? Where are the parts that feel more at rest or peaceful?

Melody

What is the melody? Is it ornamented at some point? If so, what is the ornamentation? What is the contour of the melody? Does it ascend? Descend? Remain static? Is there a form to it? If so, can you describe it? Is melody smooth? Angular? What is the character of the melody? Aggressive? Placid? Mournful? Jubilant? What makes you think so? Use an example from the music. Is there ever more than one melody playing at once? Does the melody ever exist without accompaniment (is it monophonic)? Could the accompaniment parts be referred to as melodies?

Form

Is there a melodic or rhythmic figure that you hear more than once? Is there a harmonic figure that repeats more than once? Is there a pattern to how it repeats? Can you describe the pattern? Why might the composer have used (or not used) this pattern? Does the composer change the melody (or harmony)? Describe how. Does the music feel like it increases in tension? Decreases? Can you describe the arc from tension and back to relaxation? Can you describe where these events happen in the music? Does the accompaniment change or remain the same through the whole piece? Does the accompaniment ever “echo” the melody?

Texture

How do the other instruments or voices support the melody? Are they all playing at once? Do they play patterns that repeat? Do they play same thing, or are they all different? Do any of them “lock up,” or play the same thing for a moment? Does the accompaniment ever draw attention to itself and away from the melody? How complicated is the accompaniment? Does the accompaniment sound “happy,” “sad,” etc? Why? Are there moments where there is no sound (silence)? Do the musicians sound as if they are being very articulate? Mumbling? Sliding between notes? Jagged? Smooth?

Tonality

This section makes reference to the "modality" of the music (major, minor, modal, atonal, polytonal, etc.) I'm still looking for a way to get at this without having some musical training. I hope to update this later.

Miscellaneous

What makes this music Cuban, Puerto Rican, Classical, Jazz, Etc...? What features or links in this piece are the same as the last piece we listened to? Where would this piece have been performed? How would people have listened to it? What language is the piece in, if there is one? Why? How important is the text? Was the text written for the piece? Is there a form to the text? Can you describe it? Does the musical form align with the textual form? Is it syllabic (one syllable per word), or mellismatic (many notes per syllable)? Does the piece sound old? Or more contemporary? What features or sounds make it sound that way?