

What are...?

The Concepts of Music

PITCH

Pitch refers to the relative highness and lowness of a sound. Generally, it's broken into two main sections – melody and harmony. Melody is when you look at the 'horizontal' properties of pitch – one note after another. The melody might move up or down, it might stay the same, or any combination of these. Harmony is the 'vertical' properties of pitch. Are there several notes being played at the same time? Do they sound good together or do they clash? Do they create a certain 'tonality'?

DURATION

The concept of Duration is concerned with the rhythmic properties of music. At its most basic – is a note short or long? But it also covers musical characteristics such as the speed of the music as well as the use of silence (rests), repetition of rhythmic patterns, the way in which beats are grouped (metre or time signature) and various other common techniques like syncopation.

DYNAMICS & EXPRESSIVE TECHNIQUES

This concept encompasses two large areas of musical composition. Dynamics refers to the relative softness and loudness of music. Not only obvious changes within sections of music, but within smaller phrases and even single notes. It is therefore, intrinsically linked with the area of Expressive Techniques which focuses on ways in which a performer creates expression in the music, through their particular instrument. For example, the way a guitarist can bend from one note to the next gives them the ability to introduce a unique expression to the music. A harpist or pianist would have expressive techniques specific to their instrument.

TEXTURE

Layers of sound – AND THEIR ROLES within the music. This concept is all about the layers. Is there one layer? Two? Three? It might be as easy as identifying each instrument and the role they play within the piece of music – a song with one vocalist and a guitarist has two layers. The voice sings the melody, while the guitar plays the accompaniment. It might be an orchestral piece where 100 or more musicians are broken into many smaller groups, playing complex or changing roles? Texture is like the the 'vertical' version of Structure.

TONE COLOUR

Tone Colour refers to the specific qualities of a sound that makes it unique or recognisable. For example a C played on a flute will sound entirely different to the same C played on a trumpet. This concept requires you to describe the sound using adjectives – descriptive, subjective words. This can make answering exam questions really tricky! You usually refer to individual instruments when discussing tone colour, but occasionally you might be able to describe the tone colour created by a group of instruments playing together.

STRUCTURE

We can look at Structure in two ways... The 'MACRO' structure is usually the easy one - concerned with the overall makeup of the piece – breaking it into sections. Binary, Ternary, Strophic, Sonata and Rondo are all ways we can describe the 'macro' structure of a piece of music. The 'MICRO' structure refers to how a piece of music is put together within these larger sections. For example, it might have two very short, separated phrases of melody followed by a long, flowing phrase that contrasts with the first two. Repetition and the use of silence also comes under the heading of Structure, linking it very closely with Duration.