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10 min Tips to Teach Music Podcast

EP7: What does "Treatment of the Melodic Material" really mean?

So with the thank you's done, I would like to move onto this weeks podcast. The contrast episode was so well received i thought I would continue with what I think is one of the more complex questions we encounter.... the treatment of melodic material. This one always confuses students because of the word treatment. I have a great analogy for the word treatment. I won't share the one about the cow, but I will share the one about the beauty salon. I am sure many of you have been to the beauty salon and experienced a treatment. It might be a pedicure, manicure, facial, hair treatment. Who knows but I am sure you have heard the term before. In this case treatment means to alter the original. An official definition of treatment is:

the act or manner or an instance of **treating** someone or something : handling,

What if the question was "Explain the treatment of melodic material". If we look at the true definition of Explain:

Make an idea or situation clear to someone by describing it in more detail or revealing relevant facts. Give a reason so as to justify or excuse an action or event.

As opposed to **describe**, give an explanation of, make clear/plain/intelligible, spell out, put into words, express in words - this is a blow by blow list of facts about what you see and/or hear. Explain requires you to ID the detail then justify. "Cause and effect".

Answer strategy:

- ID the Core "melodic" Material
- Describe what is happening
- Find it again where it has been altered/changed/manipulated/changed roles



What is Core Material?

The main ideas that go to make up the composition. These ideas fall into three basic categories - harmonic, melodic, rhythmic. Each idea can be altered/changed/manipulated in a variety of ways:

- ▶ change roles (structure)
- ▶ change pitch (pitch)
- ▶ change rhythm (duration)
- ▶ change instrument or register (tone colour)
- ▶ change relationship with itself and others (texture)
- ▶ addition and subtraction of pitch, rhythms, articulations, effects (last 2 being expressive techniques),
- ▶ motivically develop (fragment),

Each item of "Core Material" has an initial statement and an initial job. For Example: Debussy's piano work "Voiles". It opens with one idea:

This idea is "melodic". It uses the whole tone scale, initially in 3rds moving to 4ths. Small range, begins with a descending run before leaping back to the starting register.

Voiles opening

Claude Debussy





As you can see, the opening of the piece starts with this melodic fragment which is restated with an alteration at the end of the phrase. This would be classified as an

example of the melody being "treated". In this section you can see that Debussy introduces the Bb pedal (harmonic) along with some ascending scalar movement. (melodic/harmonic)



As the piece continues, you can see the original melodic motif is shortened, restated and extended, all with the accompaniment of the Bb pedal and a descending melodic scale, reflective of the demi semiquaver run in the motif but with augmented rhythms.

Finally our two ideas superimposed, added to with our third idea, the ascending augmented chords. (harmonic).





So with this example of Debussy's Voiles, the "core material" consists of:

1. descending demi semi quaver whole tone melodic motif
2. Bb pedal - using a rhythmic repeated tone
3. Augmented Chords (because the whole tone scale will only create augmented chords.)

This would be the "Core Material". So how would you answer the question if it was "Explain the treatment of the melodic material".

Well, the descending demi semi quaver whole tone melodic motif is a melody. The Bb pedal is a harmonic device which is also melodic as it is a repeated tone. The Augmented chords are a harmonic device, however, they are still melodic in the sense that they support the melody. Therefore all of these could be commented on. A sample response might be:

Debussy treats his melodic material using **addition, subtraction, development and extension**, as well as **textural manipulation**. The original melodic motif has two phrases which both start the same way. This idea uses the whole tone scale, initially in 3rds moving to 4ths, within a small range. It begins with a descending run before leaping back to the starting register. The second phrase begins the same but is then **extended by adding** a further demi semi quaver run of 3rds and 4ths. This unifies and strengthens the melodic material, whilst **extending** the idea to reinforce the melodic idea to the listener. The Bb pedal acts as a stabilising force underneath the small ascending scalic ideas designed to offer contrast. Debussy contrasts this in bar 10 where the melodic fragment is stated again, this time with repeat using **extension**, accompanied by a descending scalic series of octaves, before reintroducing the Bb pedal. Debussy further explores the textural contrasts by **superimposing** the Bb pedal with the original idea and **adding** ascending augmented chords in the left hand to add a density to the music.



As you can see, this is a **description** of the **techniques** used, with **results**. Hopefully this is a clear sample of how the two "tasks" embedded in the question can be answered.

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