

EP 16: Unity vs Variety vs Contrast

UNITY MEANS COMMON

When you look at a question and it asks you about unity, you need to look at all the things that are common. So best strategy is to take it from the beginning and see what you can find:

LOOK for the obvious - rhythmic unison, canon, imitation, melodic unison, monophony, repeated tone, drone or pedal point, melodic or rhythmic ostinato, repeated melodic patterns, limited pitch sets, melody played by a different instrument (therefore new tone colour), same dynamic contrasts (rather than all the instruments are playing "f", look for whole section crescendos or sfz.)

LOOK for the not so obvious - harmonic movement that repeats (ground bass, repeated chord progression, pedal point or use of one chord, melodic and/or accompaniment repeated in a different key, different instruments taking on the same role

CONTRAST MEANS COMPETITION

This can be a tad tricky. If you haven't realised that contrast in music means the difference between parts or different music sound sources, then this will be quite the eye opener for you. If this comes up in a question, your strategy is:

LOOK for two different things happening at the same time. Best strategy is to ID the layers and their roles and then look for competing forces:

- Long rhythmic values versus short ones
- extreme registers of different instruments pitted against each other
- dissonance versus consonance
- repeated melody played with different articulations
- different instrumental families or tone colours competing with each other
- extreme dynamic changes like sfz or fp.
- sections pitted against each other like brass fanfare versus string chorale.



VARIETY MEANS VARIATION THUS CREATING INTEREST

This one is interesting. It is not necessarily the same as contrast. Variety can include elements of both unity and contrast. The way I always teach it is to think of variety as variations to musical elements that are already presented.

Things like:

- Melody contains a variety of articulations (bar 16 - 18) which emphasize the syncopation thus creating interest for the listener
- Melody is fragmented in Violin 1 and used in canonic entries (bars 9 - 12) through the remainder of the string section thus creating variety and interest.
- Percussion constantly changes instruments in bars 10 - 15, thus creating variety in tone colour e.g. short sharp metallic quality of the triangle followed by the long metallic suspended ring of the crash cymbal. (bar 11-12)

You get the idea. I think the big thing is the development of fact based responses. Try to avoid the "waffle" as I call it, and focus on "power sentences".

WHAT IF YOU HAVE NO SCORE?

Well, that is where your texture graph comes in handy. By using reference points, you should be able to make your point clear. Answering a variety and contrast question is clear from listening only but the unity one is always a little tricky.

Listen out for things like:

- the entire string section playing a melody in harmony
- brass fanfares
- variety of percussion instruments creating a style like "latin feel" using congas, bongos and clave. Whilst they are doing different things, (being contrast or variety), they are collectively presenting a style.
- Different instruments playing the same melodic line
- Rock band instruments like piano, bass, and guitar needing to follow a common chord progression therefore creating unity.



- Walking bass line creates unity through outlining the harmony and providing a steady pulse for the remainder of the group. It is also variety if no one else is doing it and contrast if something else like a syncopated melodic line is up against it or comping chords in the piano.

Some of these ideas are obvious and can actually be stored in your brain for later use.