



Understanding Music

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P R E F A C E

Hello! My name is Sonny Glennson and I have always had a passion for music. When I was young, I used to enjoy listening to rock music the most. I loved the raw passion of the projects and the whole aesthetic of the sound. As I grew up, my tastes of music changed. As a result, I also came to appreciate several other genres of music and the diversity of the sounds they offered. When I turned 16, in the same year that my father died, my mother bought me my first guitar and I have had it for such a long time. It was just a basic dreadnaught but at the very least, it could be played without being plugged in to anything. I am very grateful for my mother getting my foot in the door in the world of guitar. However, the rest of my development is a more personal journey and as such, I have taken it upon myself to at least become a high-level intermediate player. I know I will never be a master or a prodigy because I never had a committed mentor. So, I have a personal limit. But that does not mean I cannot do a damn good job. I just have to buckle up and do my best. I intend to learn how to play bass and finish the journey of playing lead guitar instead of being an exclusively rhythmic player.

The following document intends to serve as an introductory dive into the vast world of music theory. I intend to cover the basic definition of music, the elements of music and the purpose of music in this first section. I hope that anyone that gets the time to read this will find the information useful as well as insightful. Music is one of the things that gives me the most happiness. Therefore, I intend to share the knowledge that I have with people, who have the desire to discover the beautiful things that music has to offer.

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DEFINING MUSIC

An image of Prof. Stephen Davies sourced from auckland.academia.edu



Music as a concept can be described as pleasing sounds. Sounds that can make people feel good. Sounds that make people want to either sing along or dance. Sounds that create emotions. At least, that is how I would personally describe it.

One of the definitions given, according to Merriam Webster is that:

“it is a science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity.”

The first definition is a bit scholastic and personally, a bit difficult to understand at least at a first glance. An alternative definition that is more favourable to me would be the second one which is:

“an agreeable sound”

Stephen Davies, in one of his papers titled “On Defining Music”, a personal piece of work that he did outside his works for the University of Auckland, defines the nature of music with these words:

“Music is ancient, pan-cultural & given the spontaneous emergence of song in children, virtually universal. Moreover, we can immediately & almost infallibly recognize it.”

His paper also explores people like Levinson, who defines music as sounds that are temporally organised by a person, for the purpose of enriching or intensifying an experience through active engagement (listening, dancing & performing) with the sounds regarded primarily, or in significant measure, as sounds.

Overall, there is a general idea that comes to mind with regards to defining music. Music is an artform that can make people feel various emotions and can have an effect on the behaviour of people in certain situations. Music is a powerful tool, that can allow people to explore the unconscious mind and also reveals the secrets of the human heart. Of course, music does not always have to be enclosed to the human experience, as birds and other animals are very capable of producing musical sounds. However, for the purposes of this document, I only intend to cover music consumed and created within a human context.

ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

Music is made up of several things. I personally believe that the core parts of music are the Rhythm, the Melody, and the Harmony. Other aspects are more or less secondary, but that does not make them any less important. These parts include Dynamics, Tone Colour, Texture and Form. Therefore, if I were to construct a table describing the elements of music, it would probably look like this:

	Elements	Sub Elements
Primary Elements	Rhythm	Beat, Metre, Tempo, Syncopation
	Melody	Pitch, Theme, Conjunct, Disjunct
	Harmony	Chord Progression, Consonance, Dissonance, Key, Tonality, Atonality
Secondary Elements	Dynamics	Forte, Piano, Crescendo, Decrescendo
	Tone Colour	Register, Range, Instrumentation
	Form	Binary, Ternary, Strophic, Through-Composed
	Texture	Monophonic, Homophonic, Polyphonic

PRIMARY ELEMENTS: RHYTHM



An image of one head of a drum. Sourced from freeimages.com

According to Britannica.com, Rhythm is defined as “the placement of sounds in time/the element of time in music/following the beat, percussion or patterns.”

An interesting point to note is that the word percussion comes from the Latin word, Percussio which means “to beat”.

In short, rhythm is a numerical aspect of music where sounds have to be synchronised, to create some form of repetitive pattern.

Other interesting terms include:

- Duration: the time between music and silence.
- Tempo/BPM: the speed of the beat.

Types of Tempo	Descriptive Qualities
Largo	Large/Laboured/Slow
Adagio	Slow
Andante	Steady/Walking Speed
Moderato	Moderate/Normal
Allegro	Fast/Happy
Presto	Very Fast



Italian Geography. Image sourced from freeimages.com

An interesting factoid to note is that, most musical terms are Italian. Quoting an article from Wikipedia:

“Many musical terms are in Italian because the vast majority of the most important early composers, from the Renaissance to the Baroque period, were Italian. That period is when numerous musical indications were used for the first time.”

There are several other musical terms that would feature on this document; therefore, it would just be a good pointer to pay attention to.



Frances Wilson. Sourced from crosseyedpianist.com

An article written by Frances Wilson, who is a UK based pianist and piano teacher, goes into further detail as to why this is the case. She goes on to explain within her article “The Language of Music” that:

“From the Renaissance period, Italy established a linguistic dominance on much European art music and the terminology quickly became habitual. Like notation, it provides musicians with a common language, which is universal and are therefore understood across different countries.”



M E T R E

Metre can be described as beats that are organised into recognisable/recurring accent patterns.

Britannica.com describes metre as:

“the grouping of basic temporal units called beats, into regular measures or bars”.

To understand this in a basic sense, there has to be an understanding of sheet music, which is the way music is written and communicated. This will be covered later in a different article.

S Y N C O P A T I O N

Syncopation can be described as an interruption or a disturbance of the regular flow of a rhythm. A different description would be the displacement of notes outside of a beat but still falling within the same time signature.

Without being too elaborate at this stage, rhythm all involves the concept of time and counting. As such, this is where percussion is adopted, for the sake of keeping the melody in line with the tempo of the song. Metronomes and drums are one way to keep track of the beat of a song, but this can also be applied by the way artists choose to play their instrument. For example, either by the way the keys are struck, or the way the strings are plucked or strummed.

Some more Italian terms relating to tempo:

- **Ritardando:** Gradually slowing down the tempo.
- **Accelerando:** Gradually speeding up the tempo.
- **Rubato:** Freely and expressively making subtle changes in the tempo.

A young lady
playing guitar
by Ron Lach

PRIMARY ELEMENTS: MELODY & HARMONY

M E L O D Y

Melodies are the main layer of sound in a musical piece. This is the part of music that stands out to the listener. It is the layer of music that is most prominent and as a result, listeners are more likely to pay attention to.

Melody can also be described as the horizontal presentation of pitch (the highness and lowness of sounds) and rhythm (the element of time).

Melodies can either be easy to play or sing. These types of melodies are conjunct melodies. On the other hand, melodies that are difficult to play or sing are disjunct melodies.

A point to note is that a group/family of pitches can be referred to as a scale. A good example of this is the major and minor scales, which are more or less the typical, traditional scales.

H A R M O N Y

Harmony is the background support of a musical composition. It is a combination of musical notes that form an entire chord.

Harmony is often described relative to its harshness.

Dissonance refers to harsh harmonic combinations whereas consonance refers to smooth sounding harmonic combinations.

Other terms that are related to harmony include the following:

- Modality: Harmonies that are created by medieval notes.
- Tonality: Harmonies that are focussed on a home key centre.
- Atonality: Modern harmonies that avoid a home key centre.

SECONDARY ELEMENTS: DYNAMICS

Musical dynamics involves the loudness and softness of the sound. Several terms that are used to describe the degree of the magnitude of sounds are Italian by nature.

Italian Musical Term	Meaning in English
Pianissimo	Very Quiet
Piano	Quiet
Mezzo-piano	Moderately Quiet
Mezzo-forte	Moderately Loud
Forte	Loud
Fortissimo	Very Loud

Additional Terms include:

Italian Musical Term	Meaning in English
Crescendo	Gradually getting louder
Diminuendo/Decrescendo	Gradually getting softer
Accent	Punching/Leaning on notes for the sake of emphasis



SECONDARY ELEMENTS: TONE COLOUR (TIMBRE)

Tone colour or Timbre (pronounced *tim-breh*) is the unique quality of sound coming from different instruments. The overall key is the same, but the sound produced is different. An example of this is when someone sings a melody in the key of C versus when the same melody is played on a piano or guitar.

This is done for the sake of variety, as different instruments create different sounds even though they are playing similar chords. This part of music composition is one of the elements that actively integrates itself with the element of harmony.

SECONDARY ELEMENTS: TEXTURE

Texture is the number of individual musical lines/melodies and the relationship they have with one another.
The types of texture can be best represented in a table format

Types of Texture	Meaning
Monophonic	Music that has only one note sounding at a time (Music that lacks a harmony or accompaniment)
Homophonic	Music that features two or more notes sounding at the same time. In this case, there is a prominent melody that is supported by a harmonic accompaniment in the background. This is a main feature of popular music.
Polyphonic	Music that features two or more independent melodies sounding at the same time.
Imitative	This is a special type of polyphonic texture where a musical idea is echoed from voice to voice. Think about Scarborough Fair by Simon and Garfunkel as an example.



From Left: Simon & Garfunkel (image sourced from Google.com) and Chris Martin and Guy Berryman (image sourced from gqmiddleeast.com)

SECONDARY ELEMENTS: MUSICAL FORM

This involves combining the primary elements of music composition to build a basic soundtrack. As mentioned previously, the primary elements of Western music are Rhythm, Melody and Harmony. The most common types of musical forms include the following:

- Strophic Forms: A design in vocal music, where the same music is used for several different verses (which are also known as strophes)
- Through Composed: This is a musical form where there are no repeats or returns to any large-scale musical sections.
- Binary Forms: Binary forms are a two-part form where the main sections of music are repeated to create contrast. There is a segment designated for the verse and there is a segment designated for the chorus.
- Ternary Forms: A three-part form where the initial section of a music returns after a contrasting section to create symmetry and balance.

THE PURPOSE OF MUSIC

Music has so many applications in a person's life. For starters, music is used to entertain people. It causes people to want to dance, move, work, and sing along. This is because, it has a positive effect on human emotion.

Music can be used to communicate ideas and emotions. This is mostly relevant depending on the themes of the writings involved, as well as the nature of the chords that feature within the soundtrack.

Music also has the power to create atmosphere. This is done mostly by instrumental music that can be used in movies to give emphasis to the scene. In addition to this, music can also be used to create atmosphere in restaurants, romantic settings and even churches.



From Left: James May and Michael Stevens (images sourced from Google.com)

Finally, a unique trait of music is that music has the power to increase someone's intelligence. This effect was dubbed the Mozart effect and it was based on research that was done in 1993 by the University of California. Different groups of people were exposed to different types of music, playing in different rooms. It was discovered that the people who were in the room that had classical music playing, had recorded better results in a spatial temporal task. James May however clarifies within his program Head Squeeze, that any music, which is enjoyable, has the capacity to give someone a 15-minute spatial awareness boost. But then again, he goes on to say that music actually does have the power to make someone smarter. The caveat to that idea, is that it can only be achieved by learning how to play an instrument at a young age

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