

A Sense of Style

Up to grade 5, it is generally possible to pass a theory examination just by applying rules. However after grade 5 candidates are expected to show that they know *how* the notes should be played – the dynamics, articulation and balance that show an understanding of the style of each piece. They sometimes have limited understanding of what the composer would have had in mind. They might, then, look at music by Bach



and Bartók in much the same way, without realising that the music was written for different instruments and intended to sound quite different. When they listen to music, they have little understanding of what makes music by Mozart sound different from music by Brahms. Theory students – not only in senior grades but even in diploma exams – often miss elements of style in analyses and arrangements. They may have learnt “rules” that govern how a Lutheran chorale should be harmonised, or how Classical chamber music should be written, but yet not appreciate the style a Bach chorale or a Mozart quartet,.

This resource sets out to change that. It contains the following:

- Basic exercises on recognising **scales, cadences and modulations**, as well as **metre** and types of **rhythm** (such as syncopation, hemiola and cross-rhythms), and how they can affect the character of the music.
- A description of various types of **texture** – such as range and register, block and broken chords; imitation; melodies and countermelodies; ostinati and pedal points.
- Demonstration of how ornamentation, triadic patterns and articulation affect the character of a **melody**.
- Attention to the **keyboard instruments** different composers used and how they affected the style of the music – such as how composers managed a harpsichord’s limitations, and how using the soft and sustaining pedals on a piano affects the sound of the music produced.
- Particular attention to **mood** of a piece, and the characteristics that create that mood.
- Opportunities to identify characteristics which create the **style** of a piece.

To understand music well, it is important to see it in its **context**. The resource relates the music of one composer of each period (Bach, Mozart Beethoven, Brahms, and Bartók) to the time of writing: the composer’s nationality(e.g. German, Hungarian), the instruments available (e.g. harpsichord, fortepiano), ideas of the time (e.g. The Age of Reason, Expressionism), artworks (e.g. a painting by Turner, a Palladian building), and historical events (e.g. The French Revolution, World War One). Then students gain a much better **understanding and appreciation of the style** of the music they play, study or hear.



Here is the final exercise, which brings together what has been learnt before:

Even though the music is as simple as pieces that Mozart wrote, it breaks many of the “rules” that Mozart obeyed, showing us the pain many people like Bartók suffered when their world seemed a waste land.



- a) How does the music change pitch? [There is a sudden jump from a low to a much higher register.]
- b) What elements of syncopation are there? [The lowest notes in the first two bars are on off-beats, the melody starts on an off-beat, and there is an accented melody note tied over a bar line.]
- c) Comment on the tonality of the music. [The music has a definite key centre, but there are many notes that do not seem to fit any key, and there is considerable dissonance.]
- d) How do these features affect the style of the music? [It seems confused, uncomfortable, unpredictable.]