

The Knowledge

Metre

Metre (pronounced *meeter*) refers to the pattern of beats in music. In duple metre, there are two main beats per bar (strong-weak), in triple metre there are three (strong-weak-weak), and in quadruple metre there are four (strong-weak-weak-weak).

- If the upper figure of the time signature is 2, 3 or 4 the metre is **simple**: each beat can be split into two shorter notes of identical length.
- If the upper figure of the time signature is 6, 9 or 12 the metre is **compound**: each beat can be split into three shorter notes of identical length.

2 beats per bar	2 4	Simple duple metre	6 8	Compound duple metre
3 beats per bar	3 4	Simple triple metre	9 8	Compound triple metre
4 beats per bar	4 4	Simple quadruple metre	12 8	Compound quadruple metre

All of the above are known as regular metres. Irregular metres, such as $\frac{5}{4}$, are less common and usually sound like alternate groups of two and three beats.

Any change of metre in a piece deserves comment, as does any unusual metrical effect (such as combining different metres, for example a $\frac{6}{8}$ accompanied by a bass part in $\frac{3}{4}$ time).

If there is no clear beat, we say that there is no regular metre or that the music has a free rhythm.

Tempo

Tempo is the speed of the beat (also known as the pulse). This may be indicated by an Italian word, such as Allegro (fast) or it may be shown more precisely by a metronome mark.

For example, $\text{♩} = 120$ means 120 beats a minute. That's two crotchets a second, which is a fast tempo. In pop music this same speed might be shown as 120 bpm (beats per minute).

Mention any change in tempo, such as a ritardando (slowing up) near the end of a section, as well as any temporary fluctuations in tempo caused by the use of rubato or pauses. If the speed doesn't vary, don't ignore the obvious – say that the tempo is unchanging.

Rhythm

Rhythm refers to the patterns made by notes and rests. If you are asked to write about rhythm, don't attempt to list durations (the lengths of notes and rests).

Instead, focus on distinctive features, such as the use of syncopation, triplets, dotted notes or sudden silences. Mention important contrasts and draw attention to any particular rhythmic effects, such as the use of ostinato, cross rhythms, swung rhythms, or phrases that begin with an anacrusis. Discuss any aspects of the rhythm that contribute to the mood or style of the music – for example, the steady tread of a march, the characteristic rhythm of a dance, or a specific feature such as the use of Son Clave. It is also usually relevant to mention metre when discussing rhythm.

Melody

As with rhythm, concentrate on the main features. Is the melody diatonic. Chromatic, pentatonic or hexatonic?

Are there blue notes? Is it based on a mode? Is the melody mainly conjunct (moving by step), mainly disjunct (moving by leap), or does it include both types of movement? Is it smooth or angular in outline? Does it have a narrow range or a wide range? Is it placed high or low in the range of the instrument or voice? Does it transfer from one instrument or voice to another? Is the melody decorated with lots of ornamental notes, or devices such as glissando and pitch bend, or is it plain and simple?

How is the melody constructed? Is it formed from motifs that are repeated, or used in ascending or descending sequence, or does it unfold as a continuous line? Are there any prominent intervals, such as rising 5ths or diminished 7ths?

Does the melody include scale patterns or arpeggios? Is it lyrical or fragmented? Does the melody have an overall shape – rising, falling or arch-like, or is it largely on a monotone (notes of the same pitch)? Are the main melodies contrasted with one another or are they similar?

How is the melody articulated – is it mainly legato (smooth) or staccato (detached)? Are some notes strongly accented?

Is the melody significant because it is actually a theme on which part or all of the work is based?

Harmony

Harmony refers to the chords used – it isn't an invitation to write in general about the accompaniment. Comment on whether the harmony is mainly consonant or mainly dissonant.

Write about the types of chords used – are they mostly diatonic triads, perhaps just the three main chords of a key (the primary triads on the tonic, dominant and subdominant), or are they complex chords, maybe including 7ths or chromatic notes? Does the harmony consist of block chords, arpeggios or patterns of broken chords?

In some music you may want to comment on the harmonic rhythm – that is, the rate at which the chords change. In music with a slow harmonic pace the same chord may last for several bars at a time while in music with a fast harmonic pace there are likely to be several different chords in a bar.

Mention any chord progressions that have a significant role in the music. These might include important cadences, or patterns such as the circle-of-5ths or 12-bar blues.

A discussion of harmony might also include the use of devices such as pedal points (often called drones in non-classical music), a walking bass, harmonic sequences and suspensions. If there are frequent perfect and imperfect cadences to define keys, we say that the harmony is functional.

Tonality

Remember that tonality is nothing to do with the tone of the music. It refers to the way in which major and/or minor keys are related in a piece.

Are the modulations to related keys such as the dominant or relative minor/major or are there sudden shifts to remote keys?

For exam purposes, tonality also includes the terms modal and atonal. Mention if the tonality is defined by cadences and if the composer uses different keys as a structural device.

You may also want to point out if parts of the music are based on certain sets of notes such as a pentatonic or hexatonic scale, or on the notes of an Indian rag, and whether the tonality is coloured by chromatic writing.

Dynamics

The dynamics are the relative levels of loudness and softness in a piece, indicated by symbols such as *f* (loud) and *p* (soft).

As with the other elements, examiners won't want a list – they will hope to see that you understand how different dynamic levels contribute to the work as a whole. Terraced dynamics (clear contrasts between loud and soft) are often a feature of Baroque music, even if not marked in the score. Dynamics are more subtly graded in later music, with crescendos and diminuendos between different levels.

An increase in the dynamic level may be combined with a thickening of texture and the addition of more instruments to create a climax. Conversely, a reduction in dynamic level, a thinning of the texture and a reduction in the number of instruments used may all combine to create points of repose. Of course, if there is little dynamic contrast in a piece, this too should be mentioned.

Texture

This is another word that is often misunderstood. Texture refers to the way that the various simultaneous lines in a piece relate to one another.

The three main terms you are likely to encounter are:

Monophonic An unaccompanied melodic line

If the music is monophonic, is it performed by just one person or by a number of people who all play or sing the same tune in unison or in octaves?

Homophonic A melody with accompaniment

If the accompaniment is reasonably independent of the tune the texture can further be described as melody and accompaniment. Alternatively, if the tune and accompaniment mainly move together in the same rhythm the texture is described as chordal.

Polyphonic Two or more simultaneous melodies

Also known as a contrapuntal texture (a texture consisting of counterpoint). If the music is polyphonic, do the parts imitate one another? Are there any canons? How many independent lines are there? For example, a texture of three-part counterpoint would contain three independent lines of music.

Less common types of texture include:

- Heterophonic, in which different versions of a melody are heard at the same time, such as when a folk tune is decorated independently but simultaneously by different performers.

- Antiphonal, in which two or more spatially separated soloists or groups perform alternately and in combination.
- A layered texture, in which repetitive patterns drop in and out of the overall texture to provide areas of contrast. Layered textures are often found in minimalism and in some types of music from Africa and other world cultures.
- A fugal texture (or fugato) resembles the opening section of a fugue, which starts with a short unaccompanied melodic idea. Other parts then enter with the same idea in imitation (not necessarily at the same pitch) while the previous part(s) continue with other ideas in counterpoint.

Are there any other points that might be relevant? For example, are the features such as broken chords or repetitive rhythmic figures in the accompaniment that play a role in the texture? Are there other features of interest in the texture, such as a continuous or repeated pedal, a countermelody or dialogue between different instruments?

Texture often changes during a composition. Point out if contrasts in texture contribute towards the structure of the music, such as alternate homophonic and polyphonic passages, or the use of counterpoint in a development section.

Structure

Structure can refer to the overall form of a piece or to the phrase structure of its individual sections. In some music the overall form can be labelled (for example, sonata form, ternary form, strophic song or ground bass) but in other cases it may need to be explained.

Try to show the purpose of the various sections – for instance, a fanfare might announce the start of a piece, the exposition in sonata form introduces the main keys and themes, the coda is a concluding section intended to confirm the tonic key, and an instrumental interlude in a song adds variety and also gives the singer a break.

Key elements to identify in the structure of music are repetition, contrast and varied repetition (which may be anything from a slightly changed ending to variation of an entire passage).

Mention any devices that contribute to the structure, such as emphasising the dominant ('dominant preparation') to signal the imminent return of the tonic key, the use of ostinato or riff as a unifying device within a section and, in pop and rock, the use of a hook as a structural device.

It's not usually practical to comment on the phrase structure throughout a whole set work, but draw attention to any important aspects, such as the use of balanced phrases, the ways in which melodic ideas fit to a pre-determined chord progression such as the 12-bar blues, or the construction of longer phrases from short motifs. Are the phrases paired in a question and answer (or call and response) style?