

Commentary on Course MS-261 Musical Devices

About 2/3rds of the way through my tenure as a teacher of music technology, I had long felt that students in my Department evidenced little understanding of how to develop a theme into a complete musical composition.

To be fair, they were not composition students *per se*, but I knew that being able to compose garden variety music would come in *very* handy in their careers. How did I know this? Because it was so in *my* career, although I never billed myself as a “composer.” I *made money* a number of times because I could compose something that was necessary at short notice. That means I had to be aware of various musical “devices” I could *quickly* call on to get the job done!

At my undergraduate school, in an advanced “Theory” course I took, we composed “in the style of” such and so composers—requiring us to find out how their music was actually *put together*. What made Debussy’s music different from Ravel’s? Now, this was “conservatory” training, so we had to stick to canonical composers. And, we had to perform—and/or invite others to help us perform our new “in the style of” brief musical examples, on roughly a bi-weekly basis . . . invaluable class discussions ensued!

All too often, at the semester’s end review of our students’ required pieces, I found myself saying “. . . that’s a good theme, but why didn’t you develop it?” Too many mind-numbing MIDI “loops” and endless “drum loops” that ground in place—*but went nowhere*.

So, I wondered: “How many of those ‘devices of music’ I had studied could be found in popular music?” Turns out that *all* kinds of music—at least tonal music—use those same devices that I had learned in undergraduate school! So I collected *11.2 GigaBytes* of “popular” musical examples *of all stripes*, and developed numerous printed illustrative “thumbnails” gleaned mostly from *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Canonical definitions—contemporary uses.

Of course, the objections from a few of my colleagues: “. . . he’s not even a composer, etc.” were all too predictable. But I had those dozens and dozens of examples and was ready to go with a course, so MS-261 Devices of Music came into existence.

It was never a popular course. I learned that many of our students were “more interested” in hardware and software “devices” than the “musical devices” that comprised this course. In fact, learning a new operating system is probably easier than composing (in my not so humble opinion). There is no manual for composing—well, there are a few if you know where to look.

At any rate, I still have those 11.2 GigaBytes of music—at full CD bandwidth I might add, as I don’t like audio that is dumbed down. Perhaps if there is someone out there who wants to trade something useful to me, I’ll put those examples in Dropbox and save you a *lot* of work!

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MS-P261 Musical Devices for Music Technologists

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Description: A study of tonal musical devices, e.g., hemiola, stretto, polymeter, canon, augmentation & diminution, antiphony, *etc.* used in successful productions by music technologists and composers. Harmony and its devices are not considered. Definitions in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* act as points of departure, from which students will be challenged to illustrate how classic devices of music composition can be *extended* using electronic tools. For example, the classic concept of "retrograde" can be *extended* using electronic technology to produce "reversed audio." Also, the music technologist can repurpose "augmentation and diminution" of a theme using ratios not playable, or even notatable using acoustic means. Students will create three (3) brief productions, and one (1) extended production that exercise musical devices illustrated in class using brief recorded excerpts of contemporary and canonical popular music. Students will also submit their own brief excerpts of recordings that feature classic musical devices, gleaned from the *most current* contemporary music contexts that feature electronic means.

Objective: Students will learn to develop their basic sonic and motivic ideas into longer, coherent musical forms featuring dozens of musical devices proven effective in music production and composition. Students will learn how to use musical devices mechanistically at first if necessary, and evolve toward their use exhibiting greater sophistication and artistic intent.

Required Text: Randel, Don Michael, ed. **The New Harvard Dictionary of Music.** The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1986. ISBN 0-674-61525-5

Final Grade Determination:	Initial Projects (3):	30%
	Final Project (1):	40%
	Class Participation:	30%

Attendance Policy: Upon three (3) *unexcused* absences prior to the "W" Deadline, you may be withdrawn from the class. Withdrawal is not automatic. In case there is doubt, contact the instructor or the Counseling Center.

Course Withdrawal
"W" Deadline: _____

MS-P261 Musical Devices for Music Technologists

Topical Outline

(1) Metrical Devices

Hemiola & Duplet
Augmentation & Diminution
Polymeter & Subdivided Meters
Compound & Simple Meters
Odd & Mixed Meters

(2) Motivic Devices

Ostinato
Modal Melodies
Motifs & Leitmotifs
Antecedent & Consequent
Inversion & Mirror Images
Retrograde & Reversed Audio
Arpeggio & Broken Chord
Pedal Point & Drones
Melodic Intervals
Canon & Stretto

(3) Spatial Devices

Hocketing
Echo & Antiphony
Correlated & Uncorrelated Pans
Part writing Motion
Spatialization
Pointillism

(4) Sonic & Other Devices

Formants
Noise & Musique Concrète
Modulations: Vibrato & Tremolo
Sonic Gestures & Sound Design
Klangfarbenmelodie
Harmonic Series