**Chapter 1**

**How We Construct Music**

To discuss different aspects of music we need to speak a common language. Music, like any other human activity, has a set of symbols and definitions all its own. The notation system in existence today has roots in the Middle Ages and it changes as new music is written. This chapter leads you through the seven musical elements of Western music. In the chapter you will learn some basic terms that we will use throughout the course to describe the music we listen to.

To begin, contrary to the old saying, music is NOT a universal language. The art of music might be universal but the sounds of music and the meaning of those sounds vary per culture. In order to understand a culture’s music you must understand society’s cultural sound posts and guidelines. If you don’t believe this, simply go to YouTube and search for an example of Japanese Noh Drama or Kabuki. If you grew up in the Western world, this music will make little sense to you without a study of Japanese culture.

Let’s begin with a few questions, “Why do we perceive some sounds to be musical and others not?” Why is someone singing a sentence musical, but someone speaking isn’t? Why is the sound of a truck not musical?

For us to hear something as music, the sound must have some sort of definite pitch and duration to it. Pitch is a measurable frequency of the sound—how high or low it is. Of course, duration is simply how long the sound lasts. Musical sounds also have different dynamic levels—or, how loud or soft the sound is.

To really answer the question we need to discuss the seven elements of music: melody, rhythm, harmony, form, timbre, texture, and expression.

Melody is an easy concept to understand and a difficult one to explain. It is sort of like trying to describe the color red-how does one do that? Melody is essentially a series of tones or sounds that we perceive as a unit. It is what we usually remember most about a piece of music. We also use the words tune, song, theme, and motif in place of this word.

Melodies have shape—they rise and fall, or stay static over time, we call this contour. They also have a definite range, the distance between the highest and lowest notes. Just like sentences and paragraphs, melodies have phrase structure—the inner structure that in writing we divide by commas, periods, colons, etc. Melodies often seem to pause and restart, just like we do when we speak. Most melodies are based upon a set of pitches that we call a scale. The scale is a group of ascending or descending pitches that is in a particular pattern and is centered around one particular note. In Western music there are only 12 different notes and scales are usually a series of eight of these notes. The most important note of these eight, or home note, is what we call the key, or the tonal center.

Rhythm is the movement of music through time. Each note in a melody has a particular duration and the combination of these durations makes up the rhythm of the melody. In order for performers to more easily read music we divide notes into emphasized and un-emphasized patterns. Giving more impulse or stress or importance to one or more beats in a pattern is called placing an accent on that beat. These accents help us distinguish the patterns of the rhythm of the music. The basic unit of a rhythm is called a beat, and some of these beats are accented. The grouping of beats into larger units is called the meter of a piece of music. Meters, or groupings are most often in twos, threes, and fours—called duple meter, triple meter, and quadruple meter respectively.

Harmony occurs in music when two or more sounds happen simultaneously. In Western music harmony is described as consonant or dissonant. Consonant can best be described as a harmony that sounds at rest, and dissonant harmonies usually sound as if they are filled with tension or need to move to another sound. When we produce three or more notes at the same time we are producing a chord, and a series of chords is called a progression. Harmony is made up of a series of chords and progressions of chords that go along with the melody.

The fourth element of music is texture. Texture is the interplay between the melodies and harmonies of a work. For example, part of a piece of music may be just the melody sounding all alone. Another part may have the melody playing and a second part, which we call the accompaniment. Or, there may be two or more melodies playing simultaneously. All these are different textures. When a melody plays by itself the texture is said to be monophonic. When two or more melodies happen at the same time the texture is polyphonic. And, when a melody is accompanied by a harmony or chord progression, the music is said to be homophonic in texture.

Any musical work adheres to a particular shape, which we call form. Form in music is usually created by repetition and contrast. And, these are usually created by different melodies. Or, contrast and repetition are created by a melody having two different parts. This is the case with most of our popular music today—it has two sections, one in which the music and words stay the same each repetition, and one in which the music stays the same but the words differ. Listen to any of your most popular songs with this in mind to get the idea. In art music the songs are often long—sometimes over 40 minutes. In longer pieces like this the composer often divides the music up into big sections that we call movements. You can tell when the movement ends because the music comes to a full stop. Symphonies often have four movements.

The particular quality of a musical sound is called timbre, or tone color. The terms mean the same thing. You are already familiar with this concept; your voice has a particular timbre. So do the voices of your friends. In fact, the timbre of voices is so unique that you are able to recognize a person simply by the timbre of their voice. Music also has this quality.

The last element of music is called expression. This simply means the combination of speed and dynamics of a work. We call speed in music, tempo. Over the years we have used foreign words written in music to indicate tempo and dynamic—usually in Italian. Words like Allegro and Adagio mean, fast and slow respectively. Piano and forte mean soft and loud. Such words also have symbols that musicians read in order to play the pace and loudness that the composer wanted. While these may sound like technical terms, their meaning goes much deeper. Just listen to many different versions of any song. They usually differ in tempo and dynamics and performers use these two expressive devices to bring their own interpretation to a piece of music.

To understand the musical examples of this text, you need to get a good understanding of these fundamentals.