

What we've looked at so far has been primarily centred on the melodic side of motifs; i.e. the way pitches can be used in development. However I believe rhythm can play an equally important role and there are an equally great number of variables we can use. I want to look at two parameters of this: counterpoint and more melodic -style development of rhythmic motifs.

The Bach Invention we looked at last lesson was competitively simple in its use of rhythms. However, those that were present were carefully deployed between the polyphonic lines of the two hands to form a graded sense of tension and release, in exactly the same way as the harmonic scheme of the piece. If we look through it, we find that the most harmonically 'tense' part of the work, around bars 13-14, is also where both hands are most rhythmically active, as it is the first and only time in the piece where there are semiquavers at the same time in both hands. Notice also that at the very start, the sense of one hand having a more important part – the 'subject' of the invention – is heightened by its faster note values. This use of rhythm is one of the reasons why all of Bach's contrapuntal music is so successful: he uses it to help make clear the hierarchy of motifs or contrapuntal lines at any point. It also maintains the momentum of the music by allowing 'filling-in' even if the harmony is static at a particular point. Often his fugue subjects contain fairly long note values which are then set against counter-subjects of running quavers or short sub-phrases punctuated by rests, as well as containing recognisable motifs. See, for example, the first fugue in the Well-Tempered Clavier (C maj). The unexpected 'turn' on beat 3 is a motif that is highly recognisable because of its rhythmic contrast even though its pitch content is unremarkable¹.

Rhythmic motifs can also be used as word-painting. The double-dotted rhythms of a 'French overture' became synonymous with music written for the entrance of royalty, and in many works by Bach we find he uses this motif in a religious context, most famously in the 'Wachet Auf' cantata BWV140 (composed for Advent, the entrance of Christ into the world). In turn, Mozart employs the same device in the Introit to his Requiem for the same purpose. By the time of Wagner, we find that the rhythms of a character's Leitmotif are as significant as the pitches (the Valkyries' motif is subjected to all kinds of transformations, but its triplets from the famous *Ride* are maintained). Tchaikovsky was a master (aside from his great melodic gift) of devising short rhythmic ideas that underpin longer spans in his symphonic works. To take another example, Dvorak's 'New World' symphony is constructed from a very tight set of materials. In particular, almost every theme contains a dotted rhythm:

1st mvt., introduction:



¹ I found it delightful to learn that the subject in this fugue appears precisely twenty-four times, the same as the total number of keys, and therefore the number of preludes and fugues in each volume of the WTC.



1st mvt., first subject:



1st mvt., second subject:



2nd mvt., first subject:



2nd mvt., end of second subject:



Finale, first subject:



Finale, bridge passage:

