

Compose Yourself!

Freshen up your repeats

- by Arne Sahlén

Unity and variety are two great needs in composing -- the Composer's U-V Index, as we said before. A small change may have big effect when a section returns. Brahms is a master at it; his Intermezzo Op. 117 #2 has some thrilling twists and turns in the returning bits. For a more modern take, "Mama Mia" by the supergroup ABBA has *one note*, inserted and later sustained as choruses return, layering in something extra.

These are cases of *technique* - composing technique - used for *artistic* results. You can do it too! Adding change to repeated sections is one way to keep the listener involved and the music alive. Here are ten possible ways:

- 1) Play with modes, shifting between minor and major.
- 2) Use different *ranges* of your instrument. Some Clementi sonatinas switch octaves when sections return - giving a nice feel of the evolving musical story line.
- 3) Change some rhythms or intervals enough to add freshness - even just one note added, removed, shrunk or stretched. You may need a temporary time-signature shift, but that too can add a spark of interest.
- 4) A surprise *rest* of not too great a length (say, one or two beats) may have strong effect too - like a dramatic pause in plays or speeches. Anything to make people take notice! Again, change the time signature for that bar if needed.
- 5) Invert part or all of your theme; make up-intervals go down and vice-versa.
- 5) Experiment with phrase lengths. We seem to use 2, 4, or 8-bar phrases most of the time. Adding or removing part of a repeated phrase may attract a lot of attention. Mozart would sometimes take 'scenic detours' by playing with, repeating or extending a fragment from the *end* of a phrase.
- 6) Try bringing the theme back lower in the texture, perhaps in bass with harmonies above it, or in the middle with harmonies washing above and below it.
- 7) If a main theme returns often, can you use a different key each time? It may be a challenge to insert in the texture, but a real excitement-builder if done well. Both the Schubert song *Erlkonig* (The Elf King) and an amazing group song-midway in the recent *Dreamgirls* movie (where one group member gets kicked out) bring in some entries a step higher each time, for fantastic effect in each case.
- 8) Add MORE or LESS (thicker or thinner) texture in repeats. Switch between solid and broken chords, for instance - or you can change triads to seventh chords or vice versa. Be extra brave! Try presenting just the melody, then adding textures bit by bit! Or do the opposite as in Haydn's Farewell Symphony, where the instruments drop out one by one in last movement (a hint to the musicians' employer that they needed a holiday! Clever Haydn.)

10) Vary the *dynamics!* They're easiest of all to switch, but make sure you have a 'game plan' reason for doing so.

Try this grab-bag of ideas; see if you can come up with some of your own. More will be coming in the next Compose *Yourself!* Article.