

Musical Rhetorical Devices: An Overview

Alliteration – repetition of the same sound to begin several phrases in a row.

Anadiplosis – repetition of the end of one phrase at the beginning of the next, forming a link or chain.

Anaphora – the repetition of a sound at the beginning of a succession of phrases.

Anesis - music that intentionally makes the preceding music seem smaller by an absurd or unexpected contrast. A smaller-scale device.

Anticlimax – a sound that subverts the climax that should immediately precede it. Often used for a comic effect.

Antistrophe – repetition of the same sound at the end of successive phrases.

Antithesis – opposite sounds in a balanced or parallel construction.

Aposiopesis – a sound that comes to an abrupt stop, usually due to passion or modesty. Also, the sound that might follow is left out, and left to the imagination.

Archaism – deliberate use of a sound from an earlier or older and obsolete style or form.

Assonance – use of the same but not exact sound in musical events in close proximity.

Cacophony – the harsh joining of sounds, not necessarily harsh sounds per se.

Chiasmus – two pairs of sounds arranged in inverted order, a prime/retrograde pair. A-B-B-A.

Climax – putting phrases into an order of ascending power, through any musical means, usually combined with anadiploses. ...a-b, b-c, C-D, D!-E!

Diacope – musical element which is both preceded and followed by the same but contrasting/different musical element. A-B-A, where A outranks B.

Dialogismus – assuming an alternative but internal point of view for the purpose of having a single internal dialogue between two opposing views. Possible musical applications are two voices in counterpoint, or multiple tonalities, or alternating rhythms in either one or more voices. Also, high and low-range musical constructs sounding simultaneously but in opposition.

Ellipsis – an omission, a musical thought left deliberately unconcluded, for an effect of suspension of forward motion, or heightening interest. Ex. A series of chords, with the final cadence left incomplete.

Enapalepsis – repeating the opening element of a phrase at the end of the phrase as well. Usually small-scale device. A-B-C-D-E-A.

Enumerato – statement of musical elements individually, often in a climactic sequence, where the preceding musics are restated and summarized for a cumulative and climactic effect. Amplification by subdivision into constituent parts.

Epistrophe – finishing a series of musical phrases with the same musical element.

A-B-C-D, E-F-G-D, H-I-J-D, etc.

Epizeuxis – direct and immediate repetition of a musical event with NO intervening material, usually for emphasis.

Hyperbaton – separating or inverting the order of musical events which typically belong together, often to emphasize the initial one.

Hyperbole – exaggeration of a sound for emphasis or mere effect, comic, tragic or rhetorical.

Hypallage – the reversal, or transposition of location in the musical flow, of two elements in an order that is the opposite of their usual appearance or context.

Hyperbole – making a WAY larger musical gesture than required to make a particular point. Augmentation, extremes or extension of range or dynamic, multiple octaves, or added virtuosity.

Hypohpora – posing a musical question and then answering it, often with an extended answer. All composition might be thought of as this process writ large.

Litotes – Emphasis through understatement, or using a negative or double negative to affirm an opposite positive. Ex. A soft dynamic at a climax, or altering a particular musical texture or context to draw attention to a particular passage that is smaller, softer, or less complicated than its surroundings. Ex. The single line near the end of Ravel's La Valse.

Meiosis – understatement for the purpose of intensification, usually by denying the natural tendency of the musical event, so as to make it stand out all the more.

Metonymy – using a subset of a sound to represent a larger sound, i.e. the root, or 3rd, and 7th of a dom chord rather than all 4 notes. A tropic device.

Onomatopoeia – using musical sounds to imitate natural ones, animals, speech, weather, etc.

Parallelism – similarity of structure in a pair of related musical events. Usually a rhythm or melody, but harmony can be deployed thus as well.

Paraprosdokian – a surprise ending, often with ironic or humorous intent.

Pleonasm – the use of superfluous sounds for enrichment, an embellishing sound or ornament.

Polysyndeton – the repetition of linking or conjunctive sounds in a series of co-ordinated musical events.

Praeteritio – a pretended omission of a sound to emphasize the thing omitted and referred to. An unexpected rest, followed by the music that might have continued had the rest been absent.

Syllepsis – A musical structure that properly refers to one element that follows, but not the other. A dominant chord that is followed by its tonic, then a borrowed or altered form of that tonic. A fugal or contrapuntal melodic element that has its proper descendant, followed by an inappropriately used variation. Can be considered a sort of musical “pun” or joke.

Scesis Onomaton – a series of repeated or related sounds within a single phrase, for emphasis. They need not be adjacent, but can be separated by other materials, as long as the phrase continues as one unit. Often rhythmic in nature.

Symploce – interlacing of musical elements. A combination of anaphora and epistrophe.

Beginning a series of phrases with the same idea, whilst using a different idea that also repeats, but at the END of each phrase, i.e. a doubled repetition sequence.

The intervening material should vary.

Synchysis – musical elements that are deliberately placed in a scattered or unusual order, to emphasize their intrinsic, rather than structural, properties.

Synecdoche – using a larger structure as a substitute for a smaller structure that is contained within it, to function as the smaller one, but to different effect, i.e a chord that uses all notes in the scale or row of its origin . Tonic-dom-tonic encapsulates an entire tonal composition, which would be elaborated afterwards. A tropic device.

Tautology – repetition of a specific sound in different phrases. A trill interspersed between various melodic notes, or a chord that occurs in progression for its own recurring sonic effect.

Tricolon – groups of sounds or musical events in threes. Can be a small or large-scale structure.

Tetracolon – groups of sounds or musical events in fours. Can be small or large-scale.

Trope – a musical figure of speech, like the Alberti bass or a five-note scalar passage ala' vocal warm-up. Can be used in an ironic or satirical fashion. There are four trope types: Metaphor, not a musical device, metonymy, synecdoche, and Irony, a highly non-specific and extremely contextually-dependent musical aspect that relies on the background of the listener for its proper recognition.

The Seven Rhetorical Canons or Imperatives.

1. Intellectio – think about content and its audience.
2. Inventio – creativity.
3. Dispositio – structures, forms, cumulative effect.
4. Elocutio – using the best sounds to suit goal.
5. Memoria – the score, the written music, and its performance notes.
6. Actio- the performance itself.
7. Analytico – either a dissection of the piece, or time to talk about the music after the performance.

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