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The figure, motive, and semi-phrase

The figure is the smallest unit of construction in music. Consisting of at least one characteristic rhythm and one characteristic interval, it may include as few as two tones or as many as twelve. Usually, however, the mind tends to subdivide the units beyond approximately eight tones. The following passage (from the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata, Op. 31, No. 3) may be considered a single unit; but particularly in this case because of the meter and moderate tempo, and because the third group of four notes is the contrary motion of the second group, there is a tendency to hear this as divided into three figures:

EX 1

Allegro

However, a group such as the following would be considered as a single figure:

EX 2

Tchaikovsky, Symphony No. 6

Allegro non troppo

The term motive is occasionally used as synonymous with figure; on the other hand, a distinction is sometimes made between the figure as an accompaniment or pattern unit (as in etudes or Baroque keyboard works) and the motive as a thematic particle. The objections to using motive instead of, or as synonymous with, figure are: (a) the motive as a thematic portion may consist of two or three figures,

Footnote: Section I is considered a prerequisite for proper understanding of analysis and style. In the event, however, one desires to approach the song forms (Section II) more quickly, the materials on units of structure may be presented to the class in summarized form.

3
Chapter XXI

The suite

The suite is an instrumental form consisting of an optional number of movements. The two basic types are the Baroque suite (c. 1650-1750) and the modern suite of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Baroque suite

The Baroque suite, known also as partita in Germany and Italy, lessons in England, and ordres in France, is a collection of dance movements ranging generally in number from three to twelve. A suite by Chambonnières (c. 1650) contains twenty-eight dances. Most suites, however, consist of from four to eight movements.

The origin of the Baroque suite may be found in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practice of grouping dances by pairs. These were respectively in duple and triple meter, the second dance being a varied version of the first. The pavane-galliard and passamezzo-saltarello were thus combined. The grouping of three or more dances in a series is illustrated in lute collections of the early sixteenth century, among which is the French publication of P. Attainnant (1529).

Most important in establishing the specific dances of the early suite was J. J. Froberger (1616-67). In his works, the allemande, courante, and sarabande are used with the gigue added as an optional dance before or after the courante. In a posthumous publication of his works (1693), a Dutch publisher placed the gigue at the end of the suite. Works by Schein, Scheidt, Krieger, and Pachelbel are also of importance in the development of this form.

Bach’s six French suites, six English suites, and six partitas utilize the series allemande—courante—sarabande—optional dances—gigue. The optional dances, mostly French, include minuet, bourrée, gavotte, passepied, polonaise, rigaudon, air, etc. The English suites and partitas begin with a prelude which uses the form of invention, toccata, or, as in the English Suite No. 4, French overture. A double following a dance is a variation characterized by a running pattern.