Hear the Difference

IDENTIFYING TEXTURE IN MUSIC

Just as physical materials have texture, so does music—though, of course, texture in music is characterized by sound, not feel. You might describe the texture of a song or piece in terms of range, dynamics, articulation, or rhythmic complexity. However, the formal terms used to describe texture all refer to the number of voices, or parts, in the music and the relationships between voices. The complexity of these relationships determines whether the musical texture is thick or thin, and generally, how much is "going on." Here are the three most common types of texture, from simplest to most complex.

MULTIPLE TEXTURES

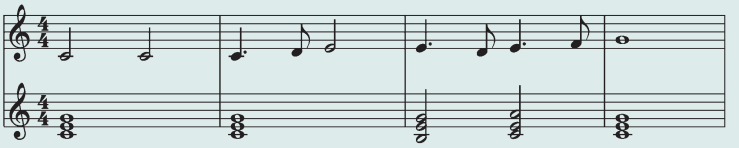
As you explore these types of texture, keep in mind that a song does not have to be classified under a single category; many pieces involve multiple textures. In a single symphony, you may find examples of all three of these textures at different moments. Many rock and pop songs are "additive," meaning they start out monophonic and develop into polyphony later on—a perfect example is Whitney Houston's ballad "I Will Always Love You."

MONOPHONIC

Literally meaning one voice, monophonic texture (monophony) refers to a single melodic line, though it may be played by one or many instruments. The voices may be in exact unison or in different octaves, as long as the same notes and rhythms are played. Nonpitched rhythmic accompaniment may be present as well. A few examples of monophony include group singing of simple tunes such as "Happy Birthday" or "The Star Spangled Banner," a solo trumpet playing "Taps," or someone whistling a song.

HOMOPHONIC

Homophonic texture (homophony) is the most common texture in Western music, both classical and popular. It is defined as having one voice, a melody, which stands out from background accompaniment. The accompaniment may be simple chords or a harmony with melodic interest, but in either case, the main melody must be clearly distinguishable. Homophony can be anything from a singer accompanied by guitar chords, to compositions by classical composers.



POLYPHONIC

Polyphonic texture (polyphony or counterpoint) involves multiple melodic voices, all of equal importance, occurring simultaneously. This complex, dense texture is typical of Renaissance and baroque music. Keep in mind, though, that multiple voices does not necessarily mean multiple instruments; polyphonic music can be played on a single keyboard instrument or guitar. Many examples of polyphony can be found in the music of Bach. All rounds, canons, and fugues (where melodies enter at different times) are considered polyphonic.