



# Classical Music

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## All Things Classical on FM 91



### A Beginner's Guide to Listening

As the warm sunbeams return and send winter's dormant landscape into a vibrant summer festival of life, I am endeavoring to improve my bird-watching skills. I have a brother who has been honing his bird expertise from a very young age, and I'm constantly astonished by his ability to recognize a species even in the most challenging conditions— when it's way off in the distance, when it's half hidden by bramble, when it's flitting about nonstop, when it's mocking a different bird's call instead of singing its own...

From my unpracticed perspective, I wouldn't be able to tell, say, a Kirtland's Warbler (which has spent 50 some years on the endangered species list) from a hill of beans. I might see a blue bird, but does that make it a Blue Bird?

So I've always enjoyed birds on a superficial level, thinking things like "what pretty songs," and "what pretty colors!" And for many years of my life, that has been perfectly fulfilling. Certainly that's valid form of appreciation in its own right. But now I'd like to go a little deeper to appreciate birds in a new way.

Developing an appreciation for classical music can feel very similar. It's an expansive world filled with oceans of ideas, and it can be hard to know where to start. Like birds, classical music can be enjoyed on any level. But without an awareness of some of the characteristics that make each work unique, it can start to sound "all the same." So let's get started on a mini-musical field guide which you can use as you listen to all our classics programs on FM 91!

When I cracked open my Peterson's field guide, I made the critical error of skipping the introduction. I circled back later when I realized I was missing structure to my observations and was therefore misremembering the features of my bird sightings. The introduction was essentially an itemized list of questions such as: What is the size of the bird? Does it swim or wade? Are the wings rounded or pointed? Is the tail squared or forked? What is the shape of its bill? How does it behave? Does it have a crest?

And the list of questions went on for about 10 pages. This mini-musical field guide is likewise a list of questions that I hope will help you zero in on some details you may not have explicitly noticed at first; these questions are inspired by a type of musical analysis used by the musicologist Jan LaRue. We sometimes call it "SHMRG Analysis," which stands for five big elements that we can consider when we listen to music: Sound, Harmony, Melody, Rhythm, and Growth.

**Sound** - some general considerations about what you're hearing.

- How many instruments do you hear? Does this sound like a large ensemble or a small one?
- Which instruments or instrument families do you hear? Each instrument has a unique timbre, or tone quality, and it will take time and repetition to recognize these. Take your best guess before you research the instrumentation.
- How and when are these instruments combined?
- What is the texture? Does it use lots of chords and no melody? Do you hear a melody plus a background accompaniment? Or do you hear multiple melodies layered on top of each other?
- How would you describe the dynamics (volume)? Do they change gradually? Suddenly? Do they switch back and forth?
- What are the loudest and softest sections?
- What kind of space does it sound like the music is performed in? Is it resonant so that the music continues to ring out even after it's finished? Or is it dry so the sound decays quickly?

**Harmony** - some considerations regarding how the pitches interact when they sound simultaneously.

- Does the composer draw from a specific collection of pitches? For example, is it based on a major or minor scale? It will take time and repetition (and some personal opining) to describe how major sounds different from minor. But luckily, composers often clue us in with their composition titles, so you can use that to start drawing some of your own conclusions.
- Does it sound like it's not either major or minor? There are many other pitch collections that could account for a different mood.
- Does the composer shift into a different pitch collection during the work?
- Does the composer jump quickly from chord to chord? Or is a single chord held out for a long time?
- Do most harmonies sound consonant—do they sound generally pleasant when the pitches are all heard together?
- Are some harmonies dissonant—do they cause a sense of tension or clashing when the pitches are all heard together?
- Do dissonant harmonies resolve into consonant ones? Or do they leave you hanging?

**Melody** - some considerations regarding the part of the music that is the most “singable.”

- What is the melodic range—what is the highest point and the lowest point?
- What is the melodic contour? Does it undulate? Does it highlight an ascending or descending motion?
- Does it move in small steps? Or large leaps? Or does it mix up step and leaps?
- When does the melody repeat, and is it altered over time?
- Are there multiple melodies? How many, and when do they occur?
- How does the timbre change as the melody changes? Does it get brighter or darker, or does it assume some other quality?
- Is the melody short and simple, or is it long and decorative?

**Rhythm** - some considerations regarding the duration of sounds.

- Are there patterns of note durations? For example: “long...short-short-short-short,” followed by another “long...short-short-short-short.”
- Are there lots of one particular duration? Constant long notes or constant short ones?
- Do you feel a constant pulse, one that you could tap your foot to? Or is it irregular? Or ambiguous?
- Are certain pulses stronger than others?
- Are there notes that surprise you by jumping out between pulses?
- What is the tempo—how quickly or slowly does the music move? And does it change over time?
- If there are lyrics, does the rhythm follow the natural linguistic flow of long and short syllables in the text?

**Growth** - some considerations regarding the overall structure and coherence of the work, to which all the other elements contribute. When we consider growth, we are looking at degrees of unity and variety.

- Is there repetition of any element? If so, when does it repeat? How many times does it repeat?
- How does any element change over time?
- The presence of repetition and change, along with other conventions like instrumentation may contribute to the overall form of the work, and over time, we have given names for works that use these particular forms.
- That’s why you will often hear a classical work identified as a: symphony, concerto, concerto grosso, rhapsody, sonata, theme and variations, character piece, song, fugue, dance, or etc. They are each associated with a specific form.

If you are a big classical music fan and you’d really like to nerd out on a more academic exploration of SHMRG analysis, you can add to your summer booklist *Guidelines for Style and Analysis* by Jan LaRue. But for now, I hope you find this to be a helpful launching point. You may even consider keeping a journal of your musical observations as you listen.

Enjoy!

- **Mary Claire Murphy**



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