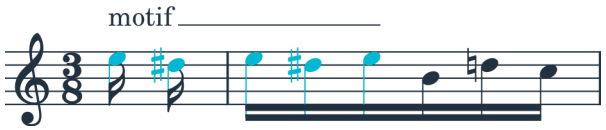Motif and sequence

Composers rarely write a brand-new idea in every bar. They take one short idea, the **motif**, and use it again and again: the same, higher, lower, changed. Spot the motif and a page of notes becomes a few shapes you already know.

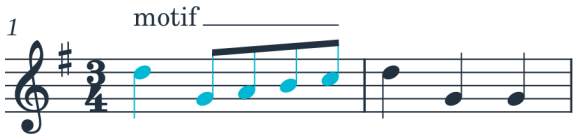
THE MOTIF · A SHORT IDEA THAT COMES BACK

Two notes · *Für Elise*



E and **D♯**, a half step apart, rock back and forth. Beethoven grows the whole tune from these two notes (Handout 342).

A drop and a climb · *Minuet in G*
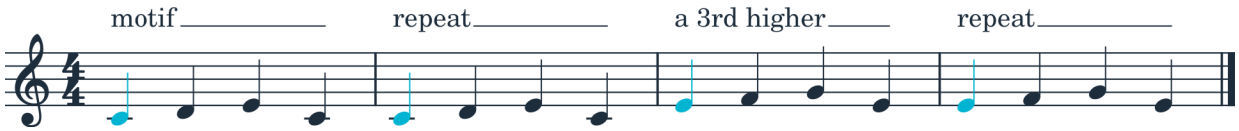


D drops to G, then climbs back by step, G–A–B–C. Bar 3 answers with a smaller drop, E to C, in the same rhythm (Handout 238).
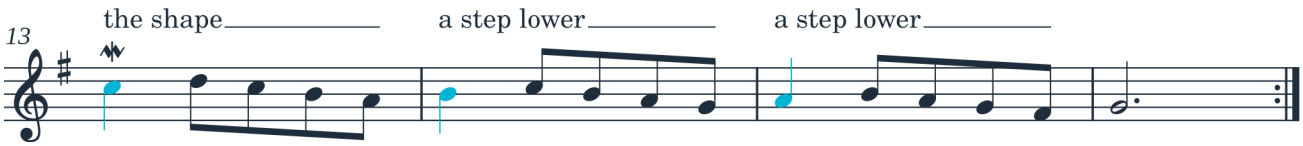
A motif is short, often just a few notes, with a rhythm and a shape you can recognize. And it comes back.

REPEAT IT, MOVE IT · REPETITION AND SEQUENCE

The simplest move is to play the motif again on the same notes: a **repeat**. The next is to play the same shape starting on a higher or lower note. The steps and skips stay the same; the whole shape starts on a new note (**cyan**). A shape repeated right away at a new height is a **sequence**.
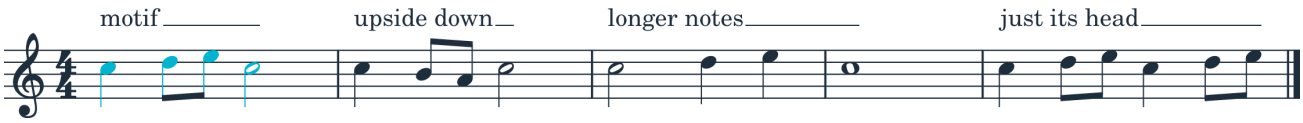


The Echo Song: bar 2 echoes bar 1, then the whole idea moves up a 3rd.



Minuet in G, bars 13–16: one shape, a step lower each time. Learn it once, then just move your hand: C, B, A.

CHANGE IT · THE SAME MOTIF IN DISGUISE

Composers also turn a motif **upside down** (every step and skip goes the other way), play it in **longer notes** (every note twice as long, so it sounds slower), or keep **just its head**, the first few notes. You can still hear the motif inside each one.



An original motif in **cyan**, then three disguises.

Try it Grow a tune from one motif: **E–D–C**, the first bar of *Hot Cross Buns*. Play it, repeat it, move it up a step (F–E–D), move it up again (G–F–E), then end on a long C. Which bars are repeats and which make a sequence? Then hunt for motifs and sequences in real music on Exercise 54, and match the words on Exercise 74.

LISTEN
Scan to hear every example
tissimo.co/worksheets/motif-and-sequence

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