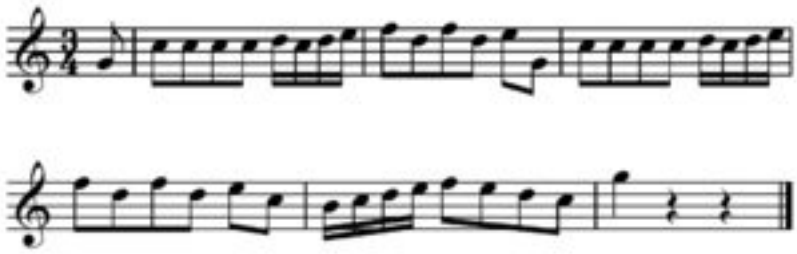
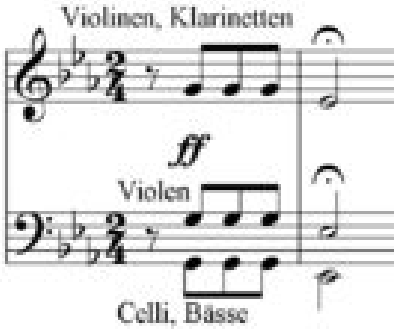
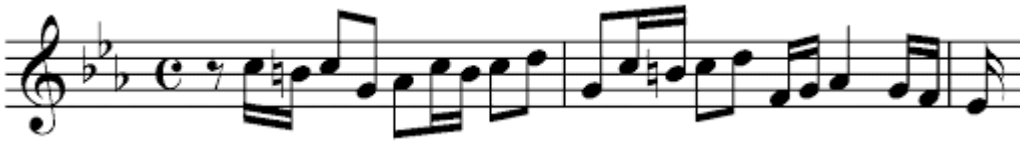
Phrase Motif Theme

Phrase is the big, generic term that at its most general simply means the sections that music tends to fall into that are very roughly analogous to sentences or phrases in language--which is where the term came from. Phrases are typically four, ***eight or sixteen measures long***.



Motif is a short melodic and/or rhythmic cell that is typically used as a structural device. The opening four notes of Beethoven's 5th Symphony are an iconic example.



Theme refers to a melodic unit that is used structurally. A good example would be the subject to a Bach fugue.