

Melody & Composition



The following pages contain information for you to consider as you compose music. In this exercise you will compose a melody over your chord progression. This process can be aided by having your chord progression recorded in some way so that you can sing or play over it. You can do this yourself or have someone else do it for you. This way you can give your full attention to composing your melody. There are certain computer software programs which are powerful tools in the aid of music composition. Some of these programs will allow you to type in a chord progression, select tempo and style; and produce an arrangement of your chord progression. Many inexpensive keyboards today have handy features such as auto accompaniment and facilities to record song backing tracks into midi files.

When we compose music we can use a number of approaches as follows:-

1. Lyrics first

Although song lyrics are, strictly speaking, not music; they contain much which can guide the formation of a composition. The theme of the lyrics can suggest the form, style, tempo and direction the music might take. To have a theme makes song writing much easier because you have already decided what you want the song to say. Also the rhythm of the syllables in the lyrics can suggest a complimentary melody.

2. Melody first

Many compositions begin with the melody first. Once you have a melody you can then proceed to choose supporting chords and decide on style, structure, tempo and so on; adding lyrics if you require.

3. Chords first

Having a good chord progression to begin with has a number of advantages. Because chords are notes in harmony they provide a broad direction or 'roadway' for your melody to 'travel along'. Having written a chord progression means that you have already made choices about harmony and this is what makes melody composition over a chord progression easier. If you have a good sounding chord progression then it is easier to come up with a strong sounding melody.

The Power of Melody

Melodies can have an evocative quality about them which makes them moving to the listener. This is the power of melody. A good composition will have a strong melody. If a tune has a perennial appeal or is memorable, much of this has to do with the strength of the melody. Good songs will sound appealing with a minimum of accompaniment; for example a singer with piano backing. It could be argued that a better song is less reliant on style, arrangement, production or musicianship than an average song. Beware of disguising a weak melody with a hip arrangement.

Sequences

Melodies are not just notes moving up or down in pitch but rhythmic ideas as well. If you have an interesting rhythm you can make a variety of melodic phrases from this rhythm. A recurring rhythm in a melody is called a sequence. Tap out the rhythm of 'Happy birthday to you' and you will notice the sequences in that song. Many songs contain sequences in their melodies.

Hooks

Hooks are the aspects of songs which the listener finds catchy or interesting. For example an infectious melodic section or easy to remember lyric or phrasing

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Motif

Motif is the distinctive feature or dominant idea in a piece of music (or other art form). Many melodies have sprung from a seed of an idea which became the motif in that composition.

Dot to dot

There are points within a chord progression which are particularly important to hit with a appropriate note; these 'sweet spots' occur on the chord changes. When writing a melody or improvising over a chord progression, if you hit one of the notes of the chord on the chord change this strengthens the end result. It is not difficult to do this in an intuitive way because of the conditioning we have received by listening to music throughout our lives. One approach you might try in composing a melody over a chord progression is what I call 'dot to dot'. Run through your chord progression and chose a note on each chord change which stands out to you. You can do this in stages. These are your dots. Then try to 'join the dots' in an interesting way with other notes and see what melodic picture emerges.

Chords Support Melodies

The usual function of chords is to support melodies. The notes most strongly supported by a chord are the notes contained in the chord. Notes other than these are adding to the complexity of the harmony and can be quite rich in their effect. Skilful composers understand the effect of the harmonic content of music and use this knowledge in their compositions. It is possible to learn and memorise the sound of different combinations of notes playing together. This understanding broadens ones musical palette and offers many options to paint over our 'dot to dot' melodic sketch.

Creative stimuli

Inspiration means 'God breathed' and therefore creative stimuli can arise from anything in all God's creation. However you might try the following to provide a creative stimulus in your efforts to compose.

Evocative Chords

Evoke means to 'call up' and applies to feelings, memories, energies and spirits. Most musicians have discovered that music has a spiritual dimension. One should exercise care when delving into this aspect of music so as to protect oneself from demonic influences. The only sure way of protection is to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God which occurs when a person trusts the Lord Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation. If you examine the careers of many prominent musicians you soon discover that their desire to go deeper into music leads them on a spiritual path of some kind. A colleague of mine once excitedly told me about his exploration of the use of melodies as spells. Be careful! Don't be deceived!

The sound of a chord, particularly one of rich or unusual harmony can be evocative in its effect on you and provide a creative trigger. Play a chord and let it 'hang in the air' and explore the response you experience.

Styles, Rhythms and Tempos

Many different styles in music are available to explore, each with a wide array of engaging rhythmic content and tempos. Most styles in music gain there wide appeal from the feelings or ideas they convey. If a style of music makes you want to dance, cry, rejoice or whatever then it can provide a source of creative stimulus for you.

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Modes

Many musicians are confused over the subject of modes. We will study modes in greater detail later. However in summary, the different major scale modes are formed by using different notes in the scale as the starting point. This is referred to as tonal centre. For example if we take a C major scale and start on C climbing alphabetically C D E F G A B C then we have the Ionian mode. Take the same notes but start on D to now form D E F G A B C D then we have the dorian mode. It is amazing how different the modes sound from each other especially when you consider that they are made of the same notes. Categorising the sound of modes, like other evocative sources is a subjective matter; but in general, the major modes sound happy or bright and the minor modes sound sad or dark. With experience a composer can understand the effect of modes and use this to suit the feeling or idea they are attempting to convey through music. Film composers do this all the time when composing music to match a scene, for example:- triumphant soldiers arrive home - major mode; funeral for fallen comrades - minor mode.

Your Melody

Choose a method of recording your melody. If you can write it out in notation great but if not record your melody onto cassette. We will use the melody and chord progression you have written as a 'centre piece' to learn other things about music. For example; working out a harmony line to your melody or writing out the melody in music notation. Happy composing!