

HOW TO WRITE ONE YOURSELF (MELODY)?

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Where do you start?
What do you want to say?
How do you want to say it?

Podcast #2

Hello. This is the second in a series of podcasts devoted to different aspects of music composition. In the first podcast we discussed some of the principal elements in creating an effective melody. They are 1) establishing a clear sense of a keynote that is the “home” note of the melody to which the tune returns often and on which it ends; 2) repetition of ideas, especially one or two rhythmic patterns; 3) finding the proper balance in the melody between steps and leaps (or skips), using mostly steps going from note to note but with a few leaps for contrast and to give the melody character and identity; and finally 4) creating an effective shape for the melody, including some material which contrasts with the main idea for variety.

Today let's talk about some ways to create your own melody. The two biggest issues are what do you want to say musically and how do you want to say it. Included in what you want to say are the general tone or “feel” of the piece: is it upbeat or slow, lively or spacious; also the size and scope of the piece: is this a large film score, a 10-minute work for ballet, a short song for voice and piano, an instrumental for jazz ensemble or a hip-hop piece? How you want to say it includes areas like instrumentation, meter, tempo, and the actual building blocks you use such as scales and rhythmic ideas as well as the form of the piece. Of course, a lot of items I just mentioned encompass more than just melody, but melody is where we start. It's often much easier to add harmony to a successful melody than the other way round.

The other big question is where do you start? Artists of all types have talked down the centuries about how daunting a blank piece of paper is whether speaking literally or figuratively, and have shared their own little tricks for getting around it. My own father, for example, was a novelist and he told me that if at the end of his work for the day he had finished a page, he always inserted a fresh page into the typewriter and typed a couple of sentences just so he wouldn't be facing a blank sheet of paper the next morning.

So IS there a best way to start a piece? The answer is . . . maybe. Through experience you can discover what works best for YOU: perhaps you improvise on the piano until an idea comes to you or you plot out everything before ever creating a note. You may always start at the beginning or prefer to get an idea and then figure out where it goes in the piece. I will give you as an aspiring composer two pieces of advice. The first is, the more you can answer the two big questions I listed earlier, that is, what you want to say and how you want to say it, and the more detail you can give yourself in your answers, right down to specific musical materials, the more likely you will be to get close to what you want to say and the less likely you will be to stumble along from idea to idea with little notion where you're going. The second piece of advice is to be prepared to drop everything to chase after a great idea which comes to you, because most of us don't get those too often.

Okay, let's get to some actual music. As you may have gathered by now, there is no single approach that fits all composers so I thought I'd use my own compositional process on one particular piece to give an example of one approach to creating a melody.

The work in question was a piece for concert band I was commissioned to write, so the instrumentation and length (5-8 minutes) were set beforehand. I decided I wanted to write a ballad, a slow melodic piece. I even had a model in mind, Duke Ellington's classic jazz ballad, “Solitude”.

Though the instrumentation of Duke's piece was more limited than mine, the feel of the piece and the basic AABA form appealed to me. As I thought about the melody I knew I wanted to be simple, so I chose to use the pentatonic scale. Of course, any 5-note scale is pentatonic, but when we talk about THE pentatonic scale it means a group of 5-notes with no half-steps which can be played using only the black notes of the piano (PLAY). Historically, any of several notes in the scale may be the keynote but most often we find either the first step, the so-called do or major pentatonic, (PLAY phrase in do) or the fifth step, the la or minor pentatonic (PLAY) functions as the keynote or tonic. I decided to use the minor pentatonic, starting on E (PLAY). The other breakthrough moment for me came when I decided to depart from the common phrase length of 8 bars. This was going to be a slow piece with a fairly simple melody and harmony in 4/4 and I wanted there to be something that was a little different, so I decided that the tune (which I hadn't yet created) was going to be 10 bars long.

With a balled I wanted space, long notes, but I thought starting with one wouldn't be very interesting, so I put 4 eighth-note pickups before the first downbeat to lead to the keynote and establish the sound. Instead of just this (PLAY LONG NOTE), I added these 4 notes (PLAY) to give the opening motif (PLAY OPENING). I liked it so much I made a sequence using the same rhythmic idea but starting higher for the second phrase (PLAY PHRASE ONE AND TWO). It became clear to me this was a tune which rose up, peaked in the middle and came down so I continued with some linking notes joining the first two phrases to a still higher version of the opening idea (PLAY PHRASES ONE-THREE). Then I knew I needed to come down gradually so the melody could be ready for a repeat (PLAY FINAL PHRASE). So here's the entire first A melody (PLAY). Since I wanted more of a jazz band sound harkening back to Ellington's "Solitude" than a standard concert band sound, I gave the opening to saxophones rather than the usual clarinets. By the way, I gave the B melody mainly to brass for contrast, but kept the opening rhythmic idea with other pitches to help unify A and B (Play B opening). Before I play you both As of the tune I must confess two things. First, composers, myself included, don't always think in step-by-step ways and the process wasn't quite as obvious as I've indicated above. My other confession is that once I started writing the melody the harmony came to mind at the same time. Some melodic writing is like pulling teeth, but this one came very quickly. So here are the opening two sections of my piece "On the Quiet Side" as performed by the Bellows Free Academy Wind Ensemble in St. Albans, Vermont. (PLAY AA')

Is this the only way to approach creating a melody? No, but I hope it helps to see how one composer began one piece, working with a plan and step-by-step. The often repeated statement about creating art of any kind that it's 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration is pretty accurate. If you sit around waiting for inspiration to hit with no more than a vague notion of what you want to create, you will likely become frustrated and discouraged. If, on the other hand, you plan out your piece as much as possible as you would complete any other task involving your mind, becoming as specific as you can, you will lay the groundwork for creating a successful melody and an effective piece. So go to it and remember that working on 1 or 2 good ideas to make them better is preferable to having 4 or 5 undeveloped musical phrases in a piece: quality not quantity.

Next time we'll discuss creating music using a motif. What's that? Listen in and find out!