

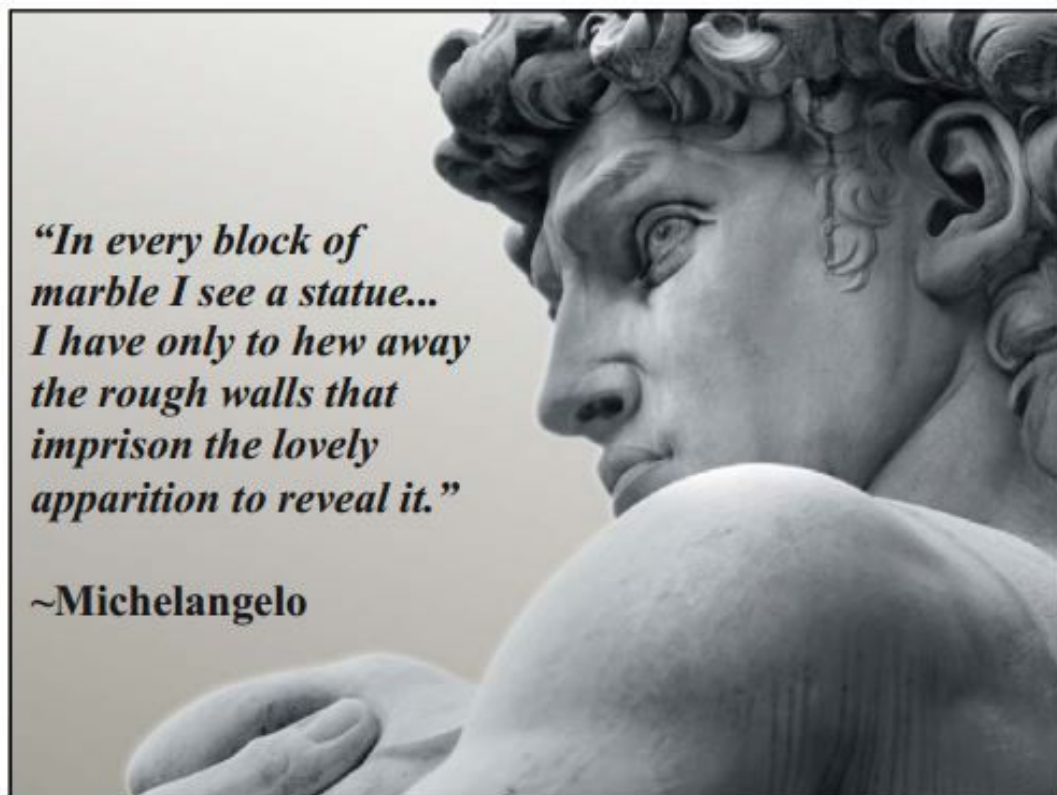


*Tips for setting words to music for young composers  
or...  
how to find the rhythm and pitch in our language*

When we set words to music, it's often more difficult than one may imagine. Who's in charge here, anyway? Do the words control the music and the composer? Or does the composer and the music control the words? There's no wrong answer, and both are possible. With some key skills and careful consideration, setting a text to music is both fun and rewarding.

But how do you start? Where do you begin?

The sculptor and artist Michelangelo once said, *“Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.”* When you think about setting your text, channel your inner Michelangelo and know there's music in the words. It's your job to discover that song.



## 1. Listen for the rhythm and pitch that you hear in your text

Let's use Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" as an example. It's a gorgeous poem that Frost wrote early in his career. We'll examine two different ways that composers have set this poem to music. Here's the first stanza of the poem:

**Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.**

Speak the poem aloud to yourself several times. Do you hear a **meter or time signature** in the words? Is it 4/4? 3/4? 6/8? When you say the poem, which words are emphasized?

does it feel like...

*Whose **woods** these are I **think** I know.  
His **house** is in the **village** though;  
He **will** not see me **stopping** here  
To **watch** his woods fill **up** with snow.*

or....do you hear it a different way?

*Whose woods these are **I** think I know.  
**His** house is in the village **though**;  
He will **not** see me stopping **here**  
**To** watch his woods fill up **with** snow.*

If you try to emphasize the poem in the second way, you should find it really hard to do. When you read it, things will just feel...off. Each line has a natural rhythm to it. Go through your text and underline or mark the stressed words to get a sense of how you *feel* the way the words are naturally emphasized.

## 2. Finding those stress patterns, and how to put the into music.

Did you ever have a teacher say to you something like: “never put the **emPHAsis** on the wrong **syLLABle?**” It’s a pretty funny joke for a teacher, and we love it because it does make a great point. Every word we speak has a natural stress on a specific part of the word.

Pi-**an**-o  
Mu-**si**c  
Foot-**ball**  
Al-a-**bam**-a

In music, this means that when we put words to a melody we have to understand the stress patterns of syllables, words, and entire sentences. There are a number of different ways to stress a word or syllable in music. These include:

**Metric Accent:** Words placed on the strong beat of a measure will sound naturally accented. In 4/4 time, beats 1 and 3 are our stronger beats, while beats 2 and 4 are weaker beats. Placing a word on the the strong beat will make a more important part of the texture.

**Example:** Stopping By Woods, two different but similar ways

**Randall Thompson - Stopping By Woods from *Frostiana***

*6/8 time signature*

*Key of F minor*

*Each stressed word in the poem is placed on beat 1 in all the measures.*

*“Snow” gets even more stress because the landing note is essentially delayed by a measure.*

*The melody rises and falls in a minor key, lending a sad and melancholy feeling to the music.*

Whose **woods** these are I **think** I know, his  
house is in the **vil - lage** though; He **will** not see me  
*small melisma on "woods"...keep that in mind for later!*  
**stop - ping** here To **watch** his woods\_\_\_\_\_ fill up with **snow**.


## Ruth Artmann - Stopping By Woods from *Frostiana*

*4/4 time signature*

*Key of G major*


*A rest on beat 1 takes the emphasis off the first word allowing “woods” and “house” be have a slight emphasis. The words that land on beat 1 of each measure likewise get a similar emphasis. Note how Ruth has chosen to emphasize “He” in measure 4 instead of the “will” that Randall emphasized. The music is less sad than Thompson’s version, given the major key and gentle rhythms. The first two lines follow the same pitch and rhythm pattern, and the rising “village though” measure helps emphasize the word “He” as it’s the highest point of the phrase.*

*the rest takes the stress  
off the first word*



Whose woods these are I think I know— His house is in the vil-lage though;

*"he" is emphasized here,  
rather than "will"*



He will not see me stop - ping here to watch his woods fill up with snow.

### \*\*\*\*\*COMPOSING TIP #1\*\*\*\*\*

Take a metronome and set it to a steady beat, with a louder click or tone on beat one. Then start reciting the text without thinking too much...see where your words land and make a mark over the stressed words on your text. Speak the words over and over and try out a bunch of different rhythms to see what *feels* right. If you trust your gut on things, they tend to work out correctly.

**Agogic Accent:** An agogic accent occurs when you make a note longer and increase the length of a word or syllable. This extra bit of length gives a stress to important words and syllables.

**Example: Hey Jude with both Agogic and Metric accents**

**HEY JUDE** 1

Words and Music by JOHN LENNON  
and PAUL McCARTNEY

Slowly and steadily

Hey Jude, don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it better. Re-member to let her in - to your heart, then you can start - to make it bet - ter. Hey

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**Dynamic Accent:** You can create an emphasis on certain words by singing them at a louder dynamic than others.

**Example: Emma Lou Diemer 3 Madrigals - The word “more” gets an incredible amount of stress and is the climax of the phrase. It’s the loudest note at the top of a crescendo with a dynamic accent, it’s the longest note so has an agogic accent, and is the highest note of the phrase so it carries a melodic accent.**

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### III. “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more!”

The musical score is for the madrigal "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more!" by Emma Lou Diemer. It is marked "Gaily" with a tempo of ♩ = 112. The score is for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B) voices, and Piano accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 8/8. The piece is in a 3/8 time signature. The lyrics are "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more!". The score shows a crescendo leading to a dynamic accent on the word "more!". The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. The vocal lines are marked with accents and dynamics such as *mf* and *f*.

## Melodic Accents:

**Type 1 - Contour Accent:** Words that are on a higher pitch (or sometimes lower) pitch than the surrounding words will create a stress on natural stress.

**Type 2 - Melismas:** As Whitney Houston once said... “and I -i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i-i, will always love you.”

A melisma is when you extend a syllable by stretching its vowel out and singing multiple pitches for the single syllable.



This is used in all types of music and especially in opera, medieval music, pop and soul music. Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston used melismas in much of their music. Sometimes, it seems like Whitney Houston’s music is almost nothing *but* melismas...take a look at I Will Always Love You. There’s only a handful of words that aren’t melismatic in it!

# I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU

from THE BODYGUARD

SheetMusic-Free.com

Whitney Houston

Words and Music by  
DOLLY PARTON

Freely

N.C.

If I should stay, I would  
on - ly be in your way. So I'll go, but I  
know I'll think of you ev - 'ry step of the way. And

Slowly

A F#m Dmaj7 E A F#m

I will always love you.

*mp*

With pedal

Dmaj7 E A(add2)

I will always love you.

*cresc.* *mf*

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