

# COMPOSING USING A SEQUENCE

Erik Nielsen

## Podcast #4

Hello. This is the fourth in a series of podcasts dealing with creating music using different compositional elements. Our subject today is the sequence. A sequence is a musical idea, usually melodic in nature, which is used several times in succession, each time beginning on a different pitch. The repetitions need not be exact imitations of the original idea but must be close enough to be easily recognizable. As an example, let's take the old French round "Frere Jacques" (PLAY PHRASES 1 AND 2). Notice how the second phrase is almost the same as the first but begins a third higher. Sequences are excellent devices for extending and solidifying a melody and can be found in just about any style of music. Let's listen now to 3 examples: (PLAY "WHITE ROOM" FROM OPENING VOCAL LINE UNTIL B); (PLAY VERSE 1 OF "BOOGIE STOP SHUFFLE"); (PLAY "IN THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING" PHRASE 1 WITH REPEAT).

Now let's examine each example. The first is "White Room", written by Jack Bruce and Pete Brown and performed by the British rock band Cream on their 1968 album "Wheels of Fire". The melody is entirely sequential, comprised of 3 successive iterations of the same short phrase (PLAY PHRASE 1) which, taken together make up a descending D Dorian scale; the first phrase (PLAY), second (PLAY), third (PLAY) and now all taken together (PLAY). As you can also hear, the melody is entirely descending, which is unusual but fits the rather surreal words dealing with desertion and loneliness. However, in the chorus there is welcome contrast both rhythmically and in terms of melodic contour to balance what happens in the verse. Let's listen now to verse 1 and pay attention for the sequences (PLAY VERSE 1, INCLUDING CHORUS).

The second example is a piece called "Boogie Stop Shuffle" composed by Charles Mingus and taken from his album "Mingus Ah Um", released in 1959. As you may have noticed from the title and the musical example you just heard, Mingus uses a boogie-woogie rhythm with even 8<sup>th</sup> notes. The part containing the sequence is the bass line played first by trombone, string bass and piano left hand and remains constant throughout the piece while other melodic parts change above it. The sequence actually follows the harmonic pattern of a 12-bar blues which accounts for the specific changes in the sequence, from the original (PLAY) to the first change (PLAY) and then the turnaround, which contains another sequence (PLAY). Let's listen to the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 verses to hear how Mingus and his ensemble use the sequential line both as a unifying factor and a base on which to build a variety of musical sections (PLAY VERSES 1-3).

The third example is taken from "In the Hall of the Mountain King", part of the "Peer Gynt Suite" by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg, written as incidental music to accompany the play of the same name by Henryk Ibsen. Grieg uses a very short idea based on the first 5 notes of the minor scale, adding the important idea of a leap of a 3<sup>rd</sup> at the end (PLAY). The ending of the first half of the theme, a sequence within a sequence, is chromatic, that is, the first repetition involves notes not in the key, giving the melody the sort of sound perfect to convey the exotic idea of a world inside a mountain (PLAY). Now let's listen to the entire theme (PLAY). The melody is played twice, then itself becomes a larger sequence, being repeated in slightly modified form a fifth higher (PLAY). Now I could tell you "That's it; that's all the musical material" and give you the idea that with so much repetition the piece becomes boring, but in fact it's quite the opposite. Grieg uses both a gradual increase in orchestral forces and a gradual acceleration to build to an exciting, frantic climax. Let's

listen to the final section (PLAY FINAL PART).

We've heard 3 examples of pieces in their finished form, but what happens when YOU want to create a piece which uses a sequence? Well, the first thing to remember from these examples is to keep the sequence idea short and relatively simple. That will make it both easy to repeat on other pitches and also to vary a bit while still keeping it recognizable. Let's look at a piece written by Joshua, a 14-year-old composer who began creating a piece for piano trio, that is, piano, violin and cello. If we look at his very first sketch of 34 bars we find that a sequence forms the first theme in much the same way as in the earlier examples I played. Here is the opening cello phrase. Count how many times the thematic idea is used in sequence (ME: re-record m. 1-5 myself then PLAY). Did you notice how Joshua played the sequence 3 times with each new iteration a third higher? There are several things to note here. The first is the unusual meter which consists of two  $7/8$  bars followed by three  $6/8$  bars. The second is how chromatic the theme sounds. That's because Joshua is using an octotonic scale which consists of 8 notes and which alternates whole steps and half steps. The third interesting facet is that after three bars of steady stepwise ascent the final two bars descend chromatically to get us back to the opening note C. Listen for all three things as I play it again (PLAY BARS 1-5 AGAIN).

Okay, good idea, right, but what to do next? Joshua makes a great decision by repeating the theme twice more, first in piano and then in violin with the piano and cello accompanying. This builds tension as well as setting the theme in our ears. He then creates a transition of six bars which leads us to the second theme which does not contain a sequence, but which provides a terrific contrast to the first theme. It does this by using the upper register and greater lyricism while still retaining some of the rhythmic drive of the opening. Let's listen now to the entire 34 bars of Joshua's first sketch of the work (PLAY ORIGINAL POSTING).

In future revisions and in the final version of his trio, which ended up about 7 minutes long, Joshua never strayed very far from his original thematic material. He used different parts of each idea, putting them together in different combinations and in different registers, using different keys and harmonies, but the material is always recognizable and maintains its character. Joshua's trio proves that it's much more important to have a couple of strong ideas and develop them thoroughly than to use a number of ideas but do little with each of them.

So let's talk about a bit of what we've touched on in this podcast. A sequence is a musical idea which is used several times in succession, each time beginning on a different pitch. We use it as a way of creating a melody, a bass line or any musical idea which we want to develop or elongate. As you can tell by the examples used it can be found in any style of music and can be used in both vocal and instrumental compositions. It is important that the idea being used in sequence have melodic and rhythmic character because your listener is going to hear it a lot. Not only that, but using a sequence well involves imagination as well as repetition. Merely repeating the sequence in a predictable or mechanical way does nothing to develop a piece of music and will lose listeners faster than blowing an air horn next to their ears. However, a well-thought-out and well-used sequence is a great tool for any composer, so get out there and give it a try. Next time we'll talk about some ways to develop the ideas you have. I hope you join me.