

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE BASS LINE

Podcast #7

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Hello. This is the seventh in a series of podcasts dealing with various elements of music composition. Up to this point we've dealt mainly with ideas at the top of the house, that is, melody and different ways to structure and develop a theme. Today we're going to the basement and will discuss the house's foundation, otherwise known as the bass line. In traditional Western harmonic writing, the bass part is extremely important as it functions as both a second melody and the foundation of the harmony. So taking the time to create an effective bass line is well worth the effort.

A good bass line can provide a piece of music with a very specific character, but it can take a variety of forms. In a setting with other instruments or the voice it can sound like this (PLAY “You Know My Name” opening 18”) or this (PLAY “The Party's Over” opening 21”) or this (PLAY “Rejoice Greatly” opening 14”).

Let's look at each of these examples in a bit more detail. The first piece we heard, sung by Chris Cornell, was the song “You Know My Name”, composed by Cornell and David Arnold. It's the theme song from the 2006 James Bond film “Casino Royale”. It's very interesting in that it includes several different approaches to creating a bass line all in the same song. It includes a bass line simply forming the foundation of the harmonic progression in the song's short bridge (PLAY 2'50”-3'03”); it plays in parallel motion with the melody in the B section of the first verse (PLAY 41”-58”); it runs in contrary and later oblique motion, that is, where one part more or less stays on the same pitch while another moves, against the melody in the chorus (PLAY 1'-1'35”). And this all within the context of a mainly descending line of a repeated-note rock bass part. I was impressed. By the way, I'm also impressed by the irregular phrasing and changes in dynamic level. For those who aren't big James Bond fans the song's still worth checking out.

The second example is taken from another movie song, “The Party's Over” from the 1956 musical comedy “Bells are Ringing”. The music was written by Jule Styne with lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolphe Greene and the present version is sung by Anita O'Day. It features what's called a walking bass line in which the bass part uses mainly quarter notes often descending in stepwise motion to set up a counterpoint to the melody and outline the harmony. One of the reasons I chose this example is that it illustrates the walking bass so well. In addition, the opening, a duet between bass and voice, makes the bass line especially easy to hear. Let's listen again. (PLAY opening 21” again) Notice how well this bass line works. It is fairly simple and yet it very effectively performs a number of functions simultaneously. It harmonizes well with the sung melody, creates a melodic counterpoint to it, helps create rhythmic interest and also widens the range of the piece by playing in a different register from the singer. It does all this without overshadowing or competing with the melody. That's what a successful bass line does. By the way, one of the interesting facets of the song is the sudden key change after the introduction. With everyone performing, the bass line is still important but is a bit less easy to pick out. (PLAY 40”- 1' AND FADE)

Our third example is the opening of “Rejoice Greatly”, an aria from “Messiah” by Georg Friedrich Haendel, or George Frideric Handel as he came to be known once he emigrated to England around 1720 to become court composer to his fellow Germans, Kings George I and II. Handel composed over 1,000 works: operas, oratorios and instrumental works of all sorts. Many of them are still very popular, including his “Water Music” and “Music for the Royal Fireworks”. But none is as well known to musicians and non-musicians alike as “Messiah”, which Handel composed incredibly in only two weeks. From its first performances in Dublin, Ireland in 1742 it immediately became popular throughout the British Isles and over the next 2 1/2 centuries has become a concert staple throughout the English-speaking world. During his lifetime Handel tailored the performances to the singers he had

available and in fact there are two quite different versions of “Rejoice Greatly”, one in 4/4 time and the original which we heard in 12/8. The bass line here is very much like a walking bass, illustrating one of several affinities between jazz and Baroque-era music. Here we have what's called a “Figured Bass” in which there is a fully-written out part for a low instrument such as cello or bassoon or a keyboard instrument such as organ or harpsichord if one was available. The catch was that the keyboard player only got a part with the bass line and a set of Arabic numerals under many of the notes to indicate in a sort of shorthand the chords the composer intended. The player was expected to improvise a full part from this skeletal bass line much as a jazz pianist improvises from a given harmonic progression. Here the melody is played by the first violin in the introduction and then sung by the soprano soloist with other strings filling in during the breaks in the singing. Let's listen to the Dunedin Consort with Susan Hamilton, soprano, and pay special attention to the cello and harpsichord and how the bass line forms a counterpoint to the melody while providing a foundation for the harmonic progression. (PLAY introduction – 43” then fade out) I don't know about you, but for me hearing this piece right after the previous example highlights some real similarities between European music of the 18th century and American jazz in the middle of the 20th century, despite the differences in word content, instrumental accompaniment and vocal style.

Okay, so you've written a melody and want to add a bass part. How do you go about it? Before we go to a student work to illustrate one approach, my general advice is to figure out a basic chord progression underneath the tune. Nothing elaborate to start and the chords needn't change with every melodic note, just a simple skeleton of chords within a key that fits the melody. From that skeleton you can elaborate until there is a clear bass line and other parts as needed.

Our student example today is a piece for brass quintet written by an 8th grader named Cecelia (Cece for short) and eventually titled “Lost and Found”. In her original version of the piece Cece had parts for all the instruments, including a bass part for the tuba. This tuba part is fairly successful. In the four-bar introduction the tuba plays almost exclusively a pattern of one dotted half note and one quarter note in each bar. The next four bars are all quarter notes. Let's listen to the tuba part alone. (PLAY original version tuba part) When we put it with the other parts we find that those quarter notes at the end of bars 1-4 provide an accent against the steady half notes of the other four parts. And in bars 5-8 the tuba line is a steady presence to help keep all faster activity in the other parts from becoming chaotic. Here are the first 8 bars with the full quintet. (PLAY full quintet first version) Those of you with some harmonic training may note that this first version needed work both in terms of parts arbitrarily stopping and starting and some not very effective chord choices. But Cece kept working so that by her third revision the tuba part is much more interesting in terms of pitches. In addition, Cece has extended the introductory rhythmic pattern of dotted half and quarter to the full 8 bars. Here it is. (PLAY tuba part version 4) Once we add the other instruments I think you'll find the harmony is much more effective and successful as an opening statement. Let's listen. (PLAY FULL QUINTET VERSION 4) Cece's final version of the piece kept the opening pretty much intact from what you just heard, so let's listen to some of “Lost and Found” from its concert performance by the Constitution Brass Quintet. (PLAY Opus 15 first 45” or so and then fade)

Cece's piece lasts only about a minute and a quarter in its entirety, and while not complex it is certainly effective and part of the credit for that goes to the tuba part with its strong harmonic underpinning, effective rhythmic patterns and melodic characteristics. “Lost and Found” is a good example of the principle of using simple means whenever possible to create both an effective bass line and a successful piece of music.

So let's review what we've talked about today. A bass line is important because it can perform several functions in a piece of music. It acts as the harmonic foundation of the piece, creates a second melodic focus in the lower register and provides a counterpoint to the main melody. In addition it can often provide its own rhythmic character which can contrast or reinforce the rhythms of other parts. Does it have to do all these things at all times? No, but if you're writing a piece of music it's a good

idea to keep these possibilities in mind as it's very easy to write chords underneath a melody without a good sense of the parts as lines, and this can be deadly to a piece. So give real thought to the foundation of your building and it will not only stand tall for all to see (and hear), but will be a monument to successful composition. Next time we'll get to spend some time with a piece that may be familiar to you if you've been listening to these podcasts. I hope you'll join me.