

## Teaching the Elements of Music in Composition

### Melody

#### Shape

There are only a handful of melodic shapes. The most common include rising, falling, arching, and static. Part of the reason these shapes always work is they give the ear a goal. They go somewhere.



Chopin, Grand Waltz, Op. 18  
A rising melody



Verdi, "La Donna è Mobile" from *Rigoletto*  
A falling melody



Vivaldi, "Spring" from *The Four Seasons*  
A static melody.

**Common Problems:** The melodies of young composers tend to be aimless and meandering. To help students shape the drama of the music have them stick to one of the three primary melodic shapes.

**Watch Out!** Encourage the students to keep their melodies within the span of an octave or a 10th. Melodies with larger ranges are more challenging to sing and play. Also, the exaggerated melodic shape loses some of its value.

#### Filling It In

This principle is often broken by young composers, but can also feel intuitive because most great melodies follow it. Many of the students I have worked with (of all ages) grasp this idea quickly and it helps improve their melodies dramatically.

The principle of "Filling It In" says that after a melody makes a leap in one direction, the ear is most pleased



Authentic Cadence (PAC).

Young composers do not need to understand the harmonic structures of the cadences to write compelling melodies. Simply apply these guidelines:

A weak cadence will end on *Mi* or *Me* (the third note of a diatonic scale).

An open-ended cadence will end on *Re*, *Sol*, or *Ti* (the second, fifth, or raised seventh note of a diatonic scale).

A strong or conclusive cadence will end on *Do* (the tonic of a diatonic scale).

One more idea to teach students when composing periods is the idea of parallel vs contrasting periods. A parallel period is where each phrase of the period begins with the same melodic material. You may choose to ask the students to compose a parallel and contrasting Consequent phrase to end their Antecedent phrase. After presenting both, a discussion can be had about which is more interesting and why.

**Common Problems:** If you introduce the idea of the question and answer phrase pairing, encourage the students to describe what the voice does when asking a question and when making a conclusive answer. For instance, we often raise our voices slightly when asking a question and lower them when making a statement. Many young composers forget this and their period feels like a semi-conclusive statement followed by a conclusive statement. Not very

dramatic or compelling.

Students will also feel bound by their melodic shape at the ends of the phrases. Give them permission to break the shape, especially when writing a question.

Some students will intuitively think in the big picture and will write a melodic shape that can be traced over the entire period. One example of this would be where the Antecedent phrase rises and the Consequent phrase falls to create a giant, or meta-, arch. Do not discourage this!

**Watch Out!** It is important that the phrases within a period be of equal length. This provides a satisfying musical experience. The students will gravitate towards phrases of two or four bars naturally because that is how most of the music they listen to is organized. You may consider placing requirements on them where each phrase must be two or four bars long. Most Common Practice music, and music written for young performers, is based on the four-bar phrase.

### *Note Sets*

When working with students who have never written music before limit their note options. Diatonic scales, especially with various minor forms, present some complexities that may get in the way of the student successfully composing a melody.

The use of the major scale is rather straightforward. Natural minor is as well, but the students may choose to raise the seventh scale degree because their ears want to hear the pull of *Ti* back to *Do*.



E-flat pentatonic scale

To simplify things and give the students early success, restrict them to the major pentatonic scale (*Do, Re, Mi, Sol, La*), especially if they have never composed before. The pentatonic scale is familiar (Amazing Grace, Cotton Eyed Joe, Swing Low Sweet Chariot, My Girl, Auld Lang Syne, Old MacDonald, etc.), easy to sing and play (you can play this video in class <https://youtu.be/n6ftB2KiZuk> “Bobby McFerrin Demonstrates the Power of the Pentatonic Scale”), you can still follow the cadence principles outlined above, and it always sounds good.

**Common Problems:** As soon as students start adding a second voice, or composing in a homophonic texture, vertical choices become as important as horizontal ones. For that reason, have students compose monophonic melodies as a first composition exercise.

**Watch Out!** Students may choose to end their phrases on *Fa, Le, or La*. It is entirely possible to write a compelling and satisfying melody that does this. However, no matter

what scale the student is using demonstrate how those pitches don't feel like either a question or an answer.

## Rhythm and Meter

### *Keeping It Simple*

The use of rhythm in student compositions will likely not be much of an issue. However, I encourage you to follow these guidelines:

Limit the students to any rhythmic patterns or subdivisions of the beat that they are currently playing in class. Some students may be drawn to complexity or feel the need to write music beyond what they themselves can perform. As I explain later, it is important that student composers hear their music performed live by their peers. For that reason alone, limit the rhythmic complexity to the level of the pieces they are working on for performance.

Emphasize the strong and weak beat patterns for each meter. Some student composers fail to combine their understanding of strong and weak metrical patterns with another element of music, such as melody. The result is a melody that reinforces the wrong beat. One example of this is when the final note of a phrase (at a cadence) falls on a weak beat, such as 2 or 4 in 4/4. Melodies, unless there is an anacrusis leading to a member of the tonic tri-

ad, should start and end on strong beats of the measure.

**Common Problems:** Besides those listed above, students tend to over-complicate accompaniment parts rhythmically. Encourage your students to do one of two things:

Keep the accompaniment very simple. In 4/4 meter this means whole and half notes. All rhythmic interest will occur in the melody.

Create a rhythmic ostinato. This ostinato should be consistent under the melody. It does not take long for the ear to recognize a pattern that repeats and keep the focus on the melody.

**Watch Out!** As students begin to explore writing with sub-divisions, ties, triplets, and dotted rhythms the notation can get messy. Teach the students to write the rhythms in a way that communicates where the beats of the measure are. You can explain that this helps in counting and prevents performance mistakes.

### *Syncopation*

Many first compositions tend to be very square. Meaning the rhythmic accents always line up with the metric accents. To combat this the student should experiment with the judicious use of syncopation.

This principle appears to fly in the face of what was described above concerning emphasizing strong beats. If the student has already clearly outlined the metrical patterns using rhythm he or she can then break that pattern for a measure or two to generate interest.



A square melody. No problems, but not very interesting rhythmically or metrically.

Two exercises for writing syncopation that work with young composers are:

In a four-measure phrase, obscure the strong beat(s) in the internal measures. The opening and closing measures of the phrase should have little to no syncopation because the rhythm needs to establish and then conclude in line with the meter. This is most easily done with the use of ties and dots.



A more interesting melody using ties to obscure beats.

Take a previously composed phrase that is square. Choose a portion of the phrase and shift it one beat or one half-beat forward.



A more interesting melody created by shifting the internal measures forward one beat.

These exercises are not guaranteed to produce incredible results. Instead, they will demonstrate to the student how they can apply syncopation to their melodies in interesting ways if they are not hearing it intuitively.

**Common Problems:** Syncopation can be challenging for a young musician to notate. Notated syncopation always looks more complicated than it sounds. The notation still needs to make the strong beats visible, but with the use of ties and dots the note that sounds during a strong beat can begin before the beat.

Here is an interesting lesson from a teacher experimenting with helping students hear, notate, and perform syncopation using a Radiohead song:

<http://teaching-matters.net/radiohead-bones-hearing-and-notating-syncopation/>.

**Watch Out!** It can be challenging to help students understand how to use syncopation tastefully. The overriding idea is that the music still needs to sound good. Helping the students become objective in their evaluation of the music they write is important. When I speak with students

I often emphasize that a composition will go through multiple drafts and that only 15–25% of my original ideas are kept.

## Harmony

### *The Phrase Model*

One of the challenges to teaching composition to younger musicians is the balancing act between the desire to give the freedom to create and the necessity of understanding music theory. Even the youngest of students can grasp the principles of melodic writing as outlined above—I've done these exercises for students as young as third grade!

But the addition of harmony adds a tremendous amount of complexity.

In order to keep it simple and facilitate composition I suggest you either provide a fixed harmonic structure or teach the phrase model. This will help students generate harmonic progressions easily. The principles of the phrase model come out of the study of counterpoint and a Schenkerian way of analyzing the meta-structures of music.

But simply, it goes like this:

Every phrase begins with a tonic chord. The harmony then progresses through a pre-dominant chord, followed