

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE MELODY?

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Strong sense of keynote

Repetition

Mostly stepwise motion

Effective shape

Podcast #1

Hello. This is the first in a series of podcasts devoted to different aspects of music composition. In this series I hope to be able to give some insights and tips, which will help aspiring composers in their quest to find their own voice and to write effective music. If you are interested in composing, this may be the series for you, even if you've never created music before. Anyone who is hardworking and dedicated can compose. Composing is a process, not just a product and once you have learned how YOU compose best, the battle is half won. And this is true no matter in what style you create, from jazz to bluegrass, classical to hip-hop and everything in between. I will talk about the process in various ways throughout this series, but I wanted to give you encouragement right at the beginning. If you want to create music, you can. It's that simple.

Today the subject is melody. As far as I'm concerned, it all starts here. In India they say all music starts with the breath. In Africa it's the heartbeat. For me melody incorporates both as it includes the pitch element implied by the Indian concept of breath AND the rhythm implied in the African idea of the heartbeat.

But the big question is: what makes a melody successful? That's hard to answer simply, though we often know a really good tune when we hear it. What I CAN say is that many effective melodies include the following elements: a strong sense of keynote, repetition, mostly steps going from note to note with a few skips as well, and a good shape. Let's examine each of these a little.

A strong sense of keynote means that we always know where "home" is in the melody. The keynote, also sometimes called the tonic, home tone or resting tone, is the most important pitch. It's the first step of whatever scale is being used, whether major, minor or modal. The melody bears out that importance by returning to the keynote often, emphasizing it by leading to it at various times and almost always ending on it.

Listen to one of the world's best-known melodies, the French folk song first made famous in a set of variations for piano and orchestra by Mozart and commonly known as Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. Although it certainly will never top anyone's chart as the latest hit tune, it has certainly stood the test of time and that tells us it has a lot to teach us about what makes a successful melody. Let's listen to the first phrase. (PLAY phrase 1) Notice what you just heard begins and ends on the same note. Not only that, but after beginning on the keynote the melody leaps up to the fifth step of the scale. This note is called the dominant in harmony studies and with good reason. Composers have used it to lead back to and reinforce the keynote for centuries, making the fifth step of the scale the second-most important and certainly the most dynamic note in any key. I always use a chess analogy to say that if the keynote is the king, the dominant is the queen.

Returning to the first phrase, note how the melody after leaping up leads by steps down to the keynote. (PLAY phrase 1 again) In fact, this idea is repeated in the second section of the melody but WITHOUT the keynote at the end. (PLAY BB). The curious thing is, the omission of the keynote in the second section doesn't do what you'd think. It doesn't weaken the sense of keynote, it actually STRENGTHENS it by leading right up to the keynote each time. I'm convinced that even if we didn't know this melody so well, we'd all be able to sing the keynote at the end of the second section because the movement down the scale has made the return to the keynote inevitable. And in fact, that's just

what happens as the tune returns to the opening phrase to finish. (PLAY BBA)

Now let's use Twinkle, Twinkle to examine the second element I mentioned earlier, repetition. There are many kinds of musical repetition and this melody uses several. It repeats notes, in fact it repeats almost every note in the tune immediately. It repeats phrases, as in the second section AND the return to the opening to finish the melody. These are both important but it's another kind of repetition I want to point out, rhythmic repetition. Using a pattern of long and short sounds is the single biggest way to give a melody character and identity. This particular tune, in fact, uses only a single rhythmic pattern throughout, namely, short short short short short short long. I'm sure if I said "Here's the rhythm to a famous melody" and clapped (CLAP RHYTHM), many of you could guess the name of the tune correctly. Does this mean if you write a melody you must only use one rhythmic pattern in order to be successful? Of course not, just that it's necessary to be aware of the importance of the repetition of rhythmic patterns which use different values during a melody. Remember that repeating the rhythm doesn't mean necessarily using the same pitches with each repetition, and that a pattern which uses different rhythmic values is easier to remember than one which uses the same rhythmic value throughout.

Let's look at the third element, the use of mostly stepwise motion. Once again Twinkle, Twinkle is an excellent example. Not only does it use almost entirely stepwise motion, but the one leap it does have is very important for several reasons. First, it comes at the very beginning (PLAY first four notes), thus giving the melody character right away. Second, as already mentioned, the leap is from the first step to the fifth step of the scale, which immediately helps establish the keynote. Third, because only one leap is used, at the beginning of the first phrase and going from the first to the second phrase, it gives a wonderful contrast to all the steps which follow it. Finally, immediately following the leap, the distance is filled in with steps, giving the phrase a marvelous sense of balance and completeness. (PLAY first phrase)

The final factor in a successful melody I mentioned earlier is a good shape. There really are many possible shapes which a successful melody can take. It can generally go up and come back down like Twinkle, Twinkle. It can go down and then up like the opening of the Welsh Christmas carol "Deck the Halls" (PLAY) It can go from the keynote upward, then fall below it and finally come back up, as in the opening of the slow movement of Haydn's Surprise Symphony. (PLAY opening) Just as important as the overall shape is the idea of forward motion which eventually leads us somehow toward home, the keynote, and also the use of some different music, both of which we find in Twinkle, Twinkle with its second section and then return to the opening phrase.

So let's review what we've discussed in this opening podcast on melody.

1. First, it's important to establish the keynote through extensive use of the first, fifth and third steps of the scale and the use of a series of notes which lead toward the keynote.
2. Second, it's important to repeat ideas, especially rhythmic patterns.
3. Third, finding the proper balance between steps and leaps, with mostly steps but with a few leaps for contrast and to give the melody character is important.
4. Finally, it's important to keep the overall shape of the melody in mind when creating it, including the use of some different material for contrast.

So if you're creating a tune, does it have to sound like a folk song? Certainly not. The principles I've outlined above apply no matter what style of music is used. (Check out Duke Ellington's "Solitude", the Beatles' "We Can Work It Out", Leonard Bernstein's "Maria" or "America" from "West Side Story", Aimee Mann's "Little Tornado" or Brahms' "Lullaby" to see what I mean.) What IS important is to think of these principles as you're creating, keeping them as a sort of checklist. Think of them not as a set of absolute rules, but as guides to help you along the way as you're creating your tune. Next time we'll explore some ways to make up a melody of your own. I hope you're listening.