

How to Write Music

A Quick Start Guide



How to Write Music

A Quick Start Guide

Introduction

Welcome to this crash course in how to write music. The approach I'm going outline for you can be applied to almost any form of music: from pop songs to hip hop tracks, film scores to string quartets.

I am assuming you probably play an instrument of some kind and therefore have some basic knowledge of music, know what a scale is and how to play basic chords, C F G etc.

Writing a simple piece of music isn't rocket science, writing a really good piece of music is a lifetime's work, but we all have to start somewhere, so let's get going!



Guy Michelmore is an award winning film, Games and TV composer. He has been nominated for an EMMY and an ANNIE and works regularly with Marvel, Disney, Dreamworks and many others with hundreds of film and TV projects to his name. He founded the distance learning company ThinkSpace Education 20 years ago which now has trained over 7000 composers and counting.

The Big Four:

Almost all music has these four elements in some form. The relative importance of the elements might vary from genre to genre but these are your core ingredients:

Harmony – Often a chord progression but essentially the sound of more than one note playing at the same time.

Melody – Tunes, hooks, motifs.

Rhythm – Can mean beats, but equally can just be the pulse and how the melody and the chord progression fits within it.

Texture – Instrumentation: how those instruments are arranged.

Then, to add to that:

Structure – The way the piece is laid out.

And you're done!

Getting Started

Choose any one of the big four.

You start with a tiny idea and then build your track around it.

It can be a chord progression.

It can be a fragment of a tune.

It can be a beat.

It can even be just a sound.

Once you have something that you like (preferably something that sounds interesting) it's time to build all the other elements around it.

Creating A Chord Progression:

I – V – vi – IV (C major – G major – A minor – F major)

This chord progression has launched a thousand hits, for example, The Beatles' *Let It Be*, James Blunt's *You're Beautiful* and Adele's *Someone Like You*. It could be this chord sequence, but it could also be anything else! I sometimes use a dice to generate a random chord sequence, then play around with it.

Broadly speaking, when you are making a chord progression, you are going to choose chords starting with what would be the most obvious, then move out into the realm of obscure and weird.

The most obvious, and the chord that starts and finishes most songs, is chord 1, (or I in Roman numerals). For example, the chord of C major (C – E – G) in the key of the same name.

Next up is chord 5 (V), G major (G - B - D) in the key of C major.

Then chord 4 (IV), F major (F - A - C) in the key of C major.

Now, let's take a walk on the wild side and try a minor chord, chord 2 (ii), D minor (D - F - A), and a chord 6 (vi), A minor (A - C - E).

Finally, you can have a listen to the slightly weird chord 3 (iii), E minor (E - B - D).

IMPORTANT NOTE - Capital Roman numerals are for Major chords, and non-capital denotes a minor chord.

After that we get into more advanced territory, like chromatic harmony, chord extensions and modulation. But we'll leave that whole side of things for now.

So using chords I, V, IV, ii and vi, come up with a chord progression. As a starting point, make it four chords long. Obviously it can be as long or as short as you like, but for the sake of this 'painting by numbers' example, let's go for a four chord sequence that you can play round and round.

Now, as you play the sequence, you will inevitably start introducing some rhythm. How fast do you change chord? Do the changes all fall on the downbeat of the bar (the ONE in the 1 - 2 - 3 - 4)?

Listen to Adele's *Hello* for an example of how a simple four chord sequence can be inspired by an interesting rhythm. Listen to the way every other chord falls *just off* the beat. It gives the whole chord progression life.

Adding a tune to chords

So, as you play this chord progression over and over, just start humming little tunes that fit in with it. I could write a lot about exactly how a tune fits with a chord progression, but the easiest (and best way) is if it simply comes naturally.

If it doesn't, you'll need to work it out the hard way. Remember the principal melody notes need to be in the chords you are choosing. So, if you are playing a C major chord, the principal melody notes could be C, E or G. That doesn't mean you can't use other notes to join the main notes together or to add a bit of interest, but if your principal melody notes are F and A, C major may probably be a bad chord choice (I hesitate to say "bad", but at least less obvious!). The obvious choice would be F major (F - A - C) or D minor (D - F - A).

Melody

Writing a tune is not as hard as some people make it seem. The hard bit is knowing when you've written a good one.

The plan is to develop a very short distinctive motif of a few notes, then build a whole tune using repetition and variation.

Start with a short simple motif of between 3 and 5 notes. No more.

Try to avoid big leaps. I know it worked for John Williams in *ET* (and Harold Arlen in *Over the Rainbow*) but a lot of tunes involve quite a lot of smaller, step movement to neighbouring notes.

Once you have a satisfying very short phrase, give it a rhythmic identity. Just going C D E D C on the beat is pretty dull. Give it a distinctive rhythm and it becomes something quite different. A distinctive rhythm means you can vary the notes within the tune or phrase while keeping the overall shape, so it becomes, recognisably, a variation on the original idea.

Examples: *Happy Birthday to You*. Think about the rhythm of the "Happy" and how often it recurs in the song.

Likewise, *Yesterday* by the Beatles. "Yes-terday all my troubles were so Far a-way". It's the same rhythm, but different notes.

So you have a great short phrase. In many styles of music that's almost enough. In dance music and hip hop often that little hook is all there is and it never develops into a more fully formed theme, but if you want to take it on to the next level then, let's do it!

Tune Structure

You need three things to make a tune work well

Repetition.

Development.

Balance.

So one by one....

Repetition – If you just state your musical idea once, nobody is going to remember it, so you need to repeat it! You can't just mindlessly repeat the same phrase over and over again however. You need....

Development – Subtle changes to the basic idea that makes it feel different, yet in the same vein. Change the ending so it goes somewhere different (like *Happy Birthday*). Change the pitches but keep the rhythm the same (like *Yesterday*).

Balance – What goes up must come down! Tunes tend to start in the home key and chord, go for a wander about, then almost always end up back on chord I (C major chord in the key of C major for example). This question and answer technique, where the first phrase is left hanging unresolved, is then balanced by the second phrase which brings it home.

Try this:

1. Play your phrase.
2. Now play it again but change the ending so it sounds unresolved. Your chord could change at the end here to end up on chord V (G major in the key of C major for example).
3. Play your original phrase.
4. Bring it home! Come up with a phrase that leads back to the home chord, chord I. This is where you might use that rhythmic identity to reflect the original idea without repeating the same notes.

This is only one of a large number of common structures for a melody. Your cheat sheet is all around you. Armed with this knowledge, listen to some songs or tunes and work out how they are structured. Listen for the three things that make tunes great:

Repetition

Development

Balance

Rhythm

The pulse of the music is vital. You need to work out how fast the piece is going to be. This is often measured in beats per minute, or bpm. A lot of pop songs and dance music are in the range of 120 – 140bpm. Slower ballads are down in the 70-90bpm range. Drum 'n bass 160+. Hip hop often 65-90.

A lot of song writers start with a beat – often a drum loop which acts as the backbone around which they build chord progressions, tunes and bass lines. When writing Hip hop and rap you generally start with the beat.

Even without a beat or drum loop, all music has rhythm and the more distinctive the rhythmic identity the better. My earlier example about Adele's *Hello* gives a very well used chord progression an interesting new lease of life. Exactly **when** you change chord is an important part of the song's rhythm (known as the harmonic rhythm) and is every bit as important as the other rhythmic elements of your tune.

Up to now I have avoided talking about technology but if you are working with a computer music programme, a DAW (digital audio workstation) like Cubase Garageband, Logic, Ableton Live, FL Studio or Reaper, then you can create beats using sampled drum kits. That's a whole new skill (and beyond this brief guide) but, for now, I would start by choosing a factory preset drum loop that suits the mood and groove of your song or tune and work with that.

Swing and shuffle are important. The feel of the piece, or the groove, is in part down to whether it is in very straight simple time or whether it is swung, which means moving towards triplets (This might not mean much to those of you new to music theory). The groove also involves anticipating the beat slightly so you're not bang on the beat but just ahead, or a tiny bit behind it.

Listen to your favourite music and work out rhythmically how strict the rhythm is.

The magic sauce is the way the rhythmic elements you are working with mess around with the pulse of the music, moving on and off the beat, carving out little rhythmic figures that the listener can latch on to and remember.

Texture

At its most simple, this is the arrangement or choice of instrument. Is it a piano or guitar? Are you using a bass and drums as well? Full orchestra or bagpipes?

No let's not go there... Not the bagpipes!

Even if you are simply playing a piano, there is so much fun to be had with texture. Are you playing straight block chords or picking out the notes to your chord one by one in

a broken chord or arpeggio? How much movement is there in the music? Maybe it's very still with long held chords and a melody over the top. Perhaps you have one instrument holding one long high or low note (known as a pedal note). That can be very effective as well.

To be honest, listening carefully to other people's arrangements and trying to reproduce elements you like is a very effective way of learning to use texture.

Stealing Ideas

At this early stage in your composing career, there is a lot to be said for copying individual elements from other bits of music you like. Don't copy the tune itself but work out how the tune is structured and use their structure with your phrase. Listen to the rhythm and work out how your idea might fit into that groove or vibe. It works great with structural things, taking a skeleton of another piece and building your own piece around another composer's framework.

But this isn't ultimately a path to greatness and glory. Sooner or later you will need to originate all the elements yourself. Stealing musical ideas in the commercial work will get you sued for plagiarism.

Structure

The big picture is how you structure the whole piece.

If it's a song it might be verse – chorus – verse - chorus – bridge/middle 8 - chorus - outro.

Each of these elements is a related musical idea; the verse might have elements you will hear in the chorus, but it is essentially a new but related musical idea. You will have to go through this whole process, working up a second and third idea to have enough raw material to create a whole song or piece out of.

One idea is never enough.

In pop songs there are all kinds of standard structures you can use that often fit into a 32 bar format.

When looking at structure, we refer to sections by capital letters.

A is the main idea.

B is another different idea.

C is yet another idea.

All of them might be related but different, so the song form ABACAB for example might be:

A = Verse

B = Chorus

A = Verse 2

C = Bridge or Middle 8

A = Verse

B = Chorus

Likewise, instrumental and classical music has it's own library of forms.

Binary form – AB

Ternary Form – ABA

Rondo Form – ABACADAEA

Again, actively listen to your favourite music and work to how the structure is put together. It's a little like a Russian doll where the smallest element of the piece is the motif which then is built into a full phrase or section using some form of repetition, variation and balance. That section in turn forms part of the larger structure of the piece of music – the ABACAB thing.

This is as complicated or as simple as you want to make it.

Conclusion

If you follow these guidelines and stick to very simple structure you will be able to create a piece of music. Don't be too ambitious. Start with a chord progression or a simple 4 or 5 note tune. Build it up into a section using repetition, variation and balance. Give it a unique, distinctive rhythmic identity, think about texture and instrumentation and build the overall structure of the piece so it has a natural and logical sense of building to a satisfying conclusion.

I hope you have found this useful and I have tempted you into my world. There is so much more to say, so much more to learn. We have only just started...