

Common Ground on the Hill

Finding Common Ground Through Song

Owen Hooks, Thom Nolan and Bill Troxler

www.3sheets.band <https://soundcloud.com/3sheets>

Qualities of a Good Melody - Generalities and 20 Guidelines

Generalities

Familiar Surprise

Listeners crave familiar, comfortable, easily accessible melodies. But they also expect to be surprised by some unpredictable element of the melody.

Movement

Music is ephemeral. It exists only in time. Time moves. Music moves in three dimensions – pitch, rhythm and harmonic implication.

Tension is Created and Resolved

This may be achieved in melody, rhythm or harmonic movement. Good melody creates tension and skillfully relieves tension.

Key Phrases or Motives are Repeated

Repetition allows a listener to comprehend and embrace a melody. Repetition is both a memory aid and a means to stay oriented within a composition.

A Sense of Home or Place or Center

Part of a composer's job is to orient the listener. As part of creating surprise a melody may wander all over the place. However, the composer must establish a sense of home or center which the listener recognizes and, despite all the melodic meanderings, wishes to regain.

Form

A recognizable form, or structure, of a melody helps listeners comprehend the tune. In part form is related to repetition. In part form is the structure of sections of the melody – part A, part B, part C, a bridge, a pre-chorus, etc. This point is why the Verse-Chorus or A-B structural model is so successful. Three part tunes are also successful. But beyond three parts in the form, listeners can get disoriented. Complexity of form is the enemy of good melody.

Constraint

Limiting the tonal range of a melody helps listeners understand and remember the music. The vocal range of most people lies within an octave or octave-and-a-half. Those limits generally bound successful melodies. Constraint in the range of music also applies to tunes. Instruments have a wider tonal range. But, explore that range with care. If the range of a tune is too great, the listener may reject it. Without constraint, a melody may seem incoherent—all over the place.

The Hook

Something within a successful melody compels an audience to listen and remember. Musicians refer to this as “the hook”. It may be the only thing that makes a melody distinctive, unique and worthy of remembering. A hook may be a riff, a chord progression, a melodic figure, a rhythmic pattern. The worst compliment a composer receives is: Oh! I love what you’ve written. It sounds just like..... This translates to mean you are an expert craftsman who neglected to create a hook.

20 Guidelines

This list was cobbled together from various sources and my experiences. It’s a mix of unattributed ideas from others and my own thoughts. Everyone who has written music, succeeded and failed has slammed into most of these guidelines the hard way. I hope reading through this list will shorten your learning curve and help you focus on creating music that will be warmly received by your listeners.

1. Use Constraint

Confine melodies within an octave, or no more than the interval of a 10th. Instrumental works can exceed this limit, but not often.

2. Rely extensively upon the pentatonic Scale

Make the pentatonic scale your permanent lover. Memorable, singable melodies generally deploy the tones of the pentatonic scale.

3. Avoid Accidentals - going outside the established tonal center (key)

Use accidentals rarely so that their effect is greatest. Too many out of key signature tones will confuse listeners.

4. Tie melodic and harmonic motion to meaning.

Employ both ascending and descending melodic lines and choose which depending upon the text of the lyric or melodic direction of the tune.

5. Invite your listeners into your music

A listener's attention will be heightened if part A of a tune or the verse in a song lacks a sense of conclusion. Use part B of a tune or the chorus of a song for closure.

6. Repeat, repeat, repeat.....

In order to ensure listener engagement and comprehension, repeat and alter phrases rather than constantly rolling out new musical ideas.

7. Symmetry and sameness in music can be boring.

Vary the length of lines in the lyric and melody. Avoid the sing-song quality that a rigid lyric structure imposes. “Crooked tunes” are generally more interesting and memorable than straight tunes. Strophic form can be powerful when used sparingly or coupled with interesting instrumental breaks and accompaniment.

8. Store energy and release the power sparingly

Write a melody using small steps that are punctuated by a small number of large leaps. Mix step-wise melodic motion with leaps and tie the leaps to meaning within the lyric

9. Coordinate the components of your music

Match the melodic contour and the harmonic rhythm, with the emotional, factual or imaginative contour of the lyrics

10. Ornaments highlight the main points of a melody

The main tones of the melody are always strengthened by preceding them with ornaments or neighboring tones.

11. Have the courage to cut your brilliant writing.

Don't impinge on the listener's good will with a work that is too long. There is a reason that the run time of most successful pop tunes is under three minutes. Dance tunes are often shorter. Deliver your story and leave the listener eager for more. Think more about elevating your listeners' curiosity and interest rather than about creating closure at the expense of mystery. Open ended works often leave the listener thinking, wondering and appreciative of those opportunities.

12. Allow the listener to discover meaning – don't lecture

Surrounding an idea in order to allow the listener to discover the idea on their own is always more effective than lecturing the listener. Respect your own fallibility as a story teller and composer. Allow the listener to do some work. They may reach a different conclusion than you had in mind. But, in doing so, they will "own" the work.

13. The tonic tone is over-rated.

Be wary of the tonic tone. Hit the tonic tone hard in the chorus or part B. Work around the tonic in the verse or part A of a tune. The tonic tone is the tone that names the key.

14. Holes are powerful.

Once a lyrical structure is in place, leave an expected phrase blank. If this has been set up properly, the listener will fill in that hole and be very pleased by the experience.

15. Change the key to engage the listener.

Create interest by changing the key of a song or tune. The technique is called "modulation". Usually it's done only once, most often at the last pass through the verse or tune. Sometimes it's done on the final chorus or a bridge, or a part C of a tune.

16. Deliver your message and stop

Build tension in melodic lines, arrive at resolution and end. Once you deliver the climax, don't let the song or tune continue to babble on.

17. Go for color

Make friends with tetra-chords and chord extensions. Particularly suspended chords (Dsus7 for example) and add 9 chords. These chords are easy to play. Their sound adds air or tension. Get past writing only using I IV V chords and their relative minors.

18. Modes deliver interest and power

Don't be a captive of major and minor keys (the Ionian and Aeolian modes). Use chord patterns from Dorian, Mixolydian modes. Following a verse or part in one mode by a melody written in a different mode will generate interest in listeners. Modal music can be powerful and memorable. Don't shy away from modes and their chord structures.

19. Research before you write – write with purpose

It is possible to write great songs and melodies without any research. But those songs and tunes come from a subconscious that has been prepared to write. Stock your subconscious with information. Let the facts and images compost a while. Only then start writing. Your work will be better, more authentic, more creative. “Noodling” is fun, but rarely memorable. Dashing off a melody or lyric is noodle. Prepare well so you can compose well. It’s also a reliable tonic for avoiding the dreaded “writer’s block”.

20. Seek feedback and honor what you get

Find people who understand the genera in which you work and who will be brutally honest with you. Take the feedback you get from them as a gift and go back to work. Creating great music is an iterative process and often a collaborative process.