

Crafting A Melody

Introduction

Melody is a language of its own that can captivate us with its beauty, release torrents of emotion we didn't know were there, settle our agitated spirits, catch us off-guard, and wedge meaning and memories into our hearts like nothing else. A well-crafted melody is powerful and can crown or undermine the song it carries. So how do we write great melodies?

The Big Picture: Story & Shape

We tend to think that it's the lyrics of a song that tell the story – but what about the melody? Each individual phrase, as well as the overall melodic entity – its direction, its motion and progression, its rise and fall, its twists and turns, its calm wandering and running ahead and troubled jumps and sudden pauses... our melodies tell a story too.

A really helpful way of thinking about melodic story is to visualise the shape of the melody and ask whether it resembles a mountain range: does it have the interest of varying ascents and descents, a high point, and do you feel like you are journeying through it? A really good example of a melody that does this well is “Slane,” used in Be Thou My Vision.

Balancing Act

Crafting a really good melody often seems to be about finding the sweet spot – the perfect balance – between various pairs of tensions:

Repetition	VS.	Contrast
Repetition (exact or varied) of melodic material gives people something to hold onto – it enables people to sing along.		Contrast brings interest and colour, making the melody distinctive and exciting – it gets our attention.
Expected	VS.	Unexpected
We need enough of the expected in our melodies to give a sense of familiarity and safety, and the satisfaction that comes from our melodic expectations being met.		We need enough of the unexpected to create those exhilarating moments where expectations are delightfully subverted – like a last minute plot twist in a story!
Antecedent (question)	VS.	Consequent (answer)
The opening of a melody can be thought of as posing a question, or setting up expectations...		...the remainder of the melody then needs to answer that question or satisfy/surprise our expectations in some way.
Regular Line/Phrase Length	VS.	Irregular Line/Phrase Length
Is every line of melody the same length (as you often find in hymns)? This creates safety and familiarity but can get dull.		Making some lines longer/shorter can give a delightful taste of the unexpected, as well as affecting the forward motion of the song.

On a related note, starting every line of melody on the same beat of the bar has a similar effect.		Starting lines/sections of melody in different places in the bar can also be a subtle but powerful way of adding interest.
Sound	VS.	Space
Melodies are made up of sound and silence – both are essential!		Using silence and inserting space – making people wait, can be a powerful technique.
Conjunct (stepwise) Motion	VS.	Disjunct Motion (leaps)
Melodies that use only stepwise motion can feel boring and restricted.		Melodies that use only leaps can be disjointed and difficult to sing.
Chord Notes	VS.	Colour Notes
Our melodies need to use notes from the chords accompanying them for it to sound like they belong together.		Using – and starting on – notes that don't belong to the underlying chord brings much more scope and emotional colour.

So when you are crafting a melody, use these pairs to ask yourself questions that will help you to critique and improve what you have written: do you have enough of each of the pairs to create both balance and tension, or are you leaning too heavily in one direction?

The Unifying Importance of Prosody

In *Writing Better Lyrics*, Pat Pattison describes prosody as “the appropriate relationship between elements” in a song. With good prosody every element belongs, fitting together in a mutually supportive way, all working together to support the song concept and its emotional treatment – good prosody is a powerful unifying force in a song.

When working on prosody, we can consider various relationships within the song:

- *Key/chords & content*: does the choice of key (major/minor) support the emotional tone of the song? Do particular chords support the meaning of the words they set?
- *Syllabic & metrical emphasis*: do the syllables that we naturally stress when saying a word line up with the notes that the metre naturally stresses in the melody?
- *Melody & meaning*: does the melody reflect the meaning of the words it sets? For example, if the lyrics talk about an ascent of some sort, is the melody heading in the right direction? If the lyrics mention stopping or waiting, could you insert a pause or some rhythmic space in the melody? If you're writing about a train could the groove somehow convey the rolling rhythm of the wheels on the track? If your song is a story about coming home, might you want to avoid using chord 1 until that moment of arrival? If the overall concept is about peace and rest, does the pace of the melody reflect that or is it hurried and cluttered?