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Melodic Contour and Organization

OF all the aspects of musical composition, the ability to write effective melodies is the most elusive, the most dependent upon natural gifts, and the most difficult to teach. But if one must rely upon natural gifts for the original conception of a melody, he can employ technique to put it in its most effective form and to make the best use of it.

Some composers seem to have been fortunate enough to conceive perfect melodies spontaneously. Mozart and Schubert apparently had this facility to a remarkable degree, but more often the original concept requires careful revision before it achieves maximum effectiveness. The sketchbooks of Beethoven provide ample proof of both the necessity and the value of such revision.

Example 3 shows various versions of the first eight measures of the second movement theme of Beethoven's *Third Symphony*. The first five versions, with certain alternate measures, appear in Beethoven's sketchbook for 1803 as edited by Nottebohm (Breitkopf and Haertel, 1880). The final version is the theme as it appears in the symphony. Beethoven wrote no key signature in the sketches, but the three flats appear to be intended throughout, corresponding with the final form. A study of these sketches reveals the evolution of a commonplace germ idea, through various stages, into a classic melody. They also reveal how a master craftsman like Beethoven approached the problem of perfecting a crude original melodic thought. The lack of interest in the second phrase of the first version is corrected, and the dotted rhythm which occurs only once in the first version becomes a characteristic unifying factor in the later versions. Every feature of the completed melody appears in the sketches, but none is exactly like it. The finished product is a composite of the best elements arrived at progressively. There is but slight hint of strength and beauty in the original idea, but Beethoven had the technique and perseverance to

realize its potential. These abilities are essential to the composer, for it is in this way many of the best melodies are produced.

Ex. 3 BEETHOVEN: *Symphony No. 3 in E-flat* (1804)

The image displays a series of musical staves representing different versions of a melody. The top two staves show early sketches with various rhythmic and melodic variations. Below these, a staff is marked with 'sf' (sforzando). Further down, another staff is marked with 'pp' (pianissimo). The bottom-most staff is marked with 'pp' and includes a tempo indication of '♩ = 80'. The notation uses a treble clef and a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The sketches show the evolution of the melody through various stages, with some measures being repeated or modified across different versions.

Unfortunately, the sketches of composers are not generally available, but much can be learned about their creative process as it affects melodic contour and organization through a study of the melodies in their works. Whether these melodies were created spontaneously or resulted from numerous revisions, they represent the version on which the composer put his final seal of approval. As such they provide models of structural and linear organization, and elements they have in common may well serve as criteria for evaluating and improving melodies of less mature composers.

Analysis is of necessity limited to features which can be observed objectively, though there exists in the best melodies an elusive quality which defies analysis. A penetration of this mystery is not possible or necessary for the composer any more than a full knowledge of life is necessary for a doctor. It suffices for the composer to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of his ideas and to be able to develop the one and eliminate the other.

Characteristics of effective melodic writing can be observed in the following twentieth-century melodies. The principles involved are equally apparent and valid in the music of previous periods, for contemporary practice is a continuation of tradition in matters of melodic contour and organization. Some twentieth-century melodies demonstrate no new technical features, while others are expressed in terms distinctly peculiar to the period. The basic principles can be illustrated most clearly by examples drawn from the former. There is considerable variation in style, design, and length, but each presents a single idea ending with a more or less complete cadence. Single, complete musical ideas can be stated in a variety of ways, all of which are known generally as periods or sentences. Various typical period structures and contours are illustrated in the following examples.

Example 4 uses only the most conventional materials, diatonic notes of E major and equal divisions of the beat. Structurally, it provides a model for one of the most common patterns—one which abounds in folk music and is particularly appropriate for stating songlike melodies. The two halves of the melody begin similarly. The first ends with an incomplete cadence; the second with a complete cadence. The number of measures and the amount of repetition vary in this type of period. The basic elements are the similar beginnings of the two phrases and the incomplete and complete cadence implications. Stepwise motion is predominant in the melody, and scale-line motion in the opposite direction invariably follows the descending fifths. There is a balance between the notes above and below the starting pitch. A climactic effect is lacking, because the highest note comes in both the first and third phrases. The scale line up from C-sharp in the eighth measure provides an effective bridge into the return of the opening. To fully appreciate the importance of this bridge, play the melody substituting a half note (like the other similar places) on C-sharp. Rhythmic motion at this point is essential to preserve the flow of the melody.

Ex. 4 STRAVINSKY: *Firebird Suite* (1910) p18¹



Example 5 illustrates different features of structure and contour with equally conventional materials. The period consists of two contrasting phrases, a structure as common as that illustrated in Example 4. Interest is added by the extension of the second phrase effected by repeating the material of measure six in measure seven. The low first note introduces a phrase leading to a climax point an octave higher at the semicadence. The climactic effect of this pitch is heightened by its duration and its repetition. Its significance is apparent though the pitch is exceeded by one step before the line begins its downward motion. In this typical contour ascending motion preceding the high point balances the descending motion following it. Two quarter notes on the first beat of the measure followed by descending motion to a note of longer value constitute the characteristic feature of the melody. This device occurs in five of the nine measures. In each instance, besides occurring on different pitches, it is subtly altered to avoid monotony while providing a strong unifying factor. The descending interval is successively a second, a fourth, a third, and finally a fifth. Only the fifth occurs more than once, and this is in connection with the extension. Since the melody is only part of a more extended composition, finality in the cadence is avoided by using the third of the scale instead of the tonic.

1. Page numbers refer to the location of the excerpt in the edition indicated, if any; otherwise in the Kalmus score.

Ex. 5 VAUGHAN WILLIAMS: *The Wasps Overture* (1909) p23¹



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The contour of Example 6, which descends to a low point and then reverses direction, is essentially an inversion of that in the preceding example. A telling melodic idea is stated in a concise five-measure phrase. Such short ideas frequently are repeated immediately, as this one is in the complete work. The repeated phrase has period function, and it represents another method of presenting a melodic idea. Unlike the period of Example 4, which it resembles, the cadences are the same for the statement and the repetition. Opportunities for internal repetition in a theme as brief as this are limited, but the two instances of dotted rhythm provide a unifying element, as does the recurrence at the end of the notes A, F-sharp, E from the beginning.

Ex. 6 PROKOFIEV: *Classical Symphony in D* (1917) p55



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Of the preceding melodies, the contour of the Vaughan Williams with the high point in the middle is encountered much more frequently than that of the Prokofiev or the Stravinsky, but the most prevalent contour of all is illustrated in Example 7. Here the ascending motion of the first phrase culminates in a secondary high point, but the highest point and real climax is reached near the end of the melody following some preliminary descending motion at the beginning of the second phrase. This basic contour, in which a major portion of the melody is devoted to ascending

motion and the climax comes toward the end, is typical of melodies in which the climax constitutes a predominant feature.

Example 7 is another period with contrasting phrases. The one-measure extension of the second phrase is achieved by delaying the resolution of the penultimate note. The treatment of the unifying devices is particularly interesting. The first five beats are repeated immediately, but interest is maintained by the rhythmic shift. Immediate repetition occurs similarly at the beginning of the second phrase. The repetition of this fragment corresponds rhythmically to the statement, but the substitution of eighth notes for quarter notes brings it to a different pitch. The eighth-note neighboring tones of measures one and three are echoed in measure seven in a manner reminiscent of the usage of the dotted figure in Example 6. These neighboring tones also serve to stress the climactic effect of the E-flat in measure eight.

Ex. 7 PROKOFIEV: *Violin Concerto No. 2 in Gm* (1935) p1



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Still another contour and organization are illustrated in Example 8. The germ of this melody is contained in the motive which appears sequentially three times. A rapid ascent to the high point near the beginning is followed by a sequential descent to the cadence. This contour is not uncommon, but sequences of this sort are frowned on by many composers. Their excessive use rapidly becomes monotonous and causes stagnation in the melodic flow, but used in moderation and particularly when varied, they provide a strong unifying factor. Though the design of the motive is constant in this example, the quality of the arpeggio, is different in each statement (major, diminished, minor) along with similar changes in the other intervals. Additional interest in melodies containing sequences is generally provided by the harmony and counterpoint associated with them. This melody is only a phrase long, but it sounds perfectly complete in the slow tempo and with its strong cadence. Thematic interest is at

a minimum in the last measure, and it serves little purpose other than to bring the phrase to a close.

Ex. 8 RACHMANINOFF: *Symphony No. 2 in Em* (1907) p124



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In contrast to the previous example which made use of sequential repetition, the following shows immediate but varied repetition at the same pitch. In each instance the type of alteration is different. The repetition of the first section comes a beat later in the measure, and the end is altered to lead into the next section. The repetition of this section is literal except for the melodic embellishment of the last two beats. The characteristic rest on the beat in the third fragment is strikingly interrupted in the repetition by the accented C-sharp in measure eleven, and the process is reversed in measure twelve where the rest replaces the accent. Each successive motive is shorter than its predecessor, and the repetition is consistently abbreviated or embellished. The internal structure, like that of many of the most interesting melodies, does not conform to any traditional pattern. The high point of the line comes near the middle, and, consistent with the character of the melody, is repeated. The way each motive leads into the next with an overlapping which makes it impossible to determine exactly where one ends and the other begins must be ranked as a stroke of genius.

Ex. 9 RAVEL: *Piano Sonatine* (1905) p2



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Though a large percentage of melodies are cast in periods made up of two phrases, any number of phrases may be used, and periods of three and four phrases are common. Any presentation of a single, complete musical idea, regardless of the number of phrases it contains, is functionally a period.

Example 10, which is a rather unusual group of five phrases and quite unlike the previous examples in structure, illustrates the flexibility possible in phrase organization. It is unlike the previous examples in still another way. Though it is the longest melody examined thus far, it exploits the most meager resources. Few composers choose to limit themselves to such drastic economy of means. In the entire twenty measures only two rhythmic patterns occur within a measure, and four of the five phrases are identical in rhythm and similar in shape. When such economy is practiced, even the slightest variation assumes exaggerated importance, and Sibelius is careful to provide a token change in each phrase. Phrase three duplicates phrase one a third higher with resultant changes in the quality of the intervals. Phrase four stands in the same relation to phrase two. The most notable deviation from the pattern and the one which does the most to rescue this melody from monotony, however, is the shift of the characteristic grace notes and dotted rhythm from the third measure of the phrase to the first in the concluding phrase, which ends with an implied

but unsounded cadence. Unusual economy of means and irregular phrase structure are coupled with the most ordinary contour. The high point of the melody comes toward the end, associated with the only dynamic change.

Ex. 10 SIBELIUS: *Pelleas and Melisande* (1905) p5



For sheer number of notes involved, the theme of Ravel's *Bolero* must certainly rank as one of the most extensive melodies. For this reason it presents a particularly interesting example of musical organization. Divided in the middle by a comparatively strong semicadence, each half descends through a series of figures to the low C. The position of the high point in the middle is usual enough, but the approach to it is unique. It comes at the beginning of a phrase after a rest and is approached by leap instead of by the more usual gradual ascending motion. Though the rhythmic subtlety of this melody can be appreciated fully only in association with its accompaniment, the skillful exploitation of rhythm is apparent, even isolated. The first impression is one of remarkable unity, but closer examination reveals a great diversity of detail. The only device which consistently recurs is that of the tie into the beat. This device appears twelve times, but even here the element of diversity is present. These twelve ties join seven different rhythmic combinations. Such ingenious manipulation of materials is evidence of technical skill.

Ex. 11 RAVEL: *Bolero* (1927) p2



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No discussion of melodic writing, even in the twentieth century, is complete without some mention of those emotion-packed melodies typical of the romantic era. For many people this type of melody is almost synonymous with the word. Though no longer in vogue with the majority of composers, the ability to write such a tune is a priceless gift in any age. The difficulty of drawing with certainty the fine line between emotion and sentiment is perhaps one reason this aspect of the art is neglected now. The following example has become somewhat hackneyed through popular adaptations, but in the original it represents highly emotional writing at its finest. With this type of melody particularly, analysis of its external characteristics provides minimal insight. Its appeal is essentially subjective. The cadence points though somewhat camouflaged can be located, and the phrases though unclearly delineated can be isolated. The climax point is effectively prepared and strategically located. The lowered sixth degree of the scale, G-flat in the key of B-flat, imparts a distinctive flavor to the melody. The sum of these features fails to account for the total effect. It stems rather from some impelling logic which defies analysis but which makes each note when heard in context sound inevitable. In a melody this is a paramount virtue.

Ex. 12 RACHMANINOFF: *Piano Concerto No. 2 in Cm* (1901) p78



The foregoing examples provide a basis for some observations regarding desirable melodic characteristics. Perhaps no tune possesses all of them, and excellent melodies have contrary features. This does not detract from the essential validity of principles based on the normal practices of recognized composers. There is no formula for writing good melodies, but these models and suggestions will prove helpful in locating and correcting weaknesses, in evaluating results, and in putting creative efforts in their most effective form. The existence of completely conventional melodies in twentieth-century music demonstrates that the older resources remain viable in the evolutionary process while the newer ones are being explored.

Melodic ideas vary greatly in length. The idea itself determines what is appropriate. Longer melodies divide into phrases delineated by cadences. The location and distribution of these cadences are extremely important. The cadence at the conclusion of an idea does not present a serious problem in melodies of definite tonality. They end on a note of the tonic chord—root for the most conclusive, third or fifth for less conclusive closes. The cadential function must be clear, but trite formulas should be

avoided. In cadences other than at the end of a work or movement the beginning of the next phrase should not be delayed too long, but the duration of the cadence note is not critical.

Incomplete cadences within a melody serve to pace the exposition of melodic ideas with a flow that is neither choppy nor aimless. The former results from cadence points too close together and too strong; the latter from cadence points too far apart and too weak. Semicadences most often are accomplished by momentary interruptions in the rhythmic flow. The proper duration for these interruptions is a subjective matter, but they should provide breathing places without causing loss of interest. Semicadences may occur on any pitch, and no one note should be overworked. Care should be exercised not to anticipate the finality of the complete cadence.

The statement of a musical idea can be entirely in one key like the examples, or it can modulate. A transient modulation can be followed by a return to the original key for the complete cadence, or another key can be established by a sufficiently strong cadence in the new key.

Repetition is evident in most melodies. Coupled with a characteristic feature, which it often is, repetition provides a powerful unifying factor. For interest, repetitions are varied and embellished. Common types of modification include changes in intervals, pitch location, key, mode, rhythm, dynamics, and combinations of these.

A characteristic feature distinguishes most good melodies. No melody is unique in every detail, but some element must set it apart. The notable feature may be a rhythm, an interval, a motive, or anything which will serve as a means of identification.

In rhythm there should be balance between unity and variety. Notes of equal value and constant patterns lack rhythmic interest. Perpetual changes of duration and pattern reduce coherence. A limited number of patterns and values used with imagination is most effective.

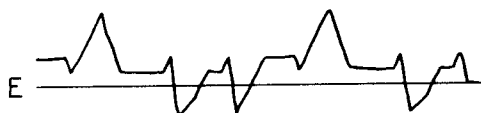
Stepwise motion is basic in melodic writing, to which is added the spice of varied skips. Skips except along chord line are generally followed by a change of direction, often by step.

Melodic units with but one thought usually have a single focal point. This focal point, or climax, is most frequently associated with the highest pitch. The climactic effect can be enhanced by rhythmic prolongation, embellishments, and dynamics. A typical melodic line is concerned with approaching and leaving the focal point in the most effective manner. There is no formula for this, but it is of primary importance. The graphs of Examples 4 through 12, given in Example 13, show some typical melodic contours. The main climax usually is approached or followed by a series of lesser high points. A balance between ascending and descending motion

is desirable, but the distribution must be determined subjectively. Too much emphasis on any one pitch is monotonous. This is especially true when the recurring note comes at cadences and at high, low, and turning points in the melody.

Ex. 13. CONTOUR GRAPHS OF EXAMPLES 4 THROUGH 12

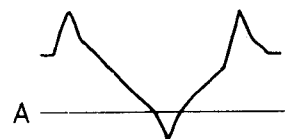
(a) Graph of Example 4



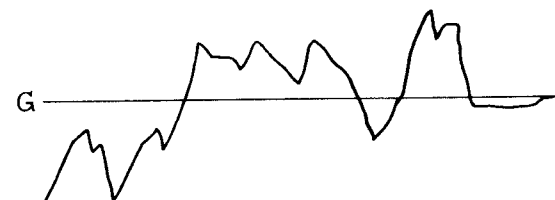
(b) Graph of Example 5



(c) Graph of Example 6



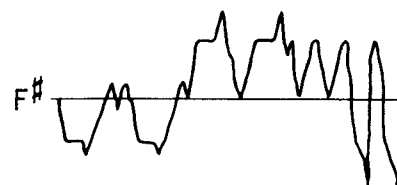
(d) Graph of Example 7



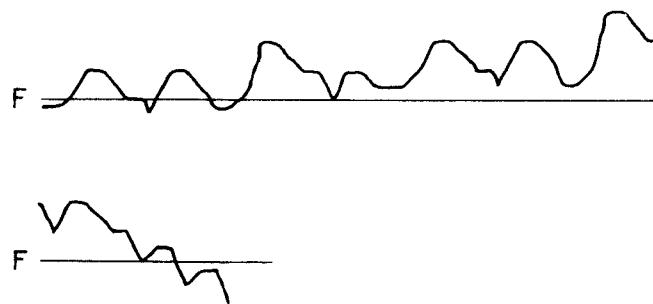
(e) Graph of Example 8



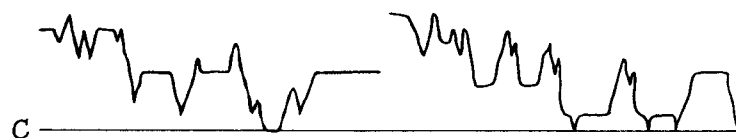
(f) Graph of Example 9 (octave embellishments omitted)



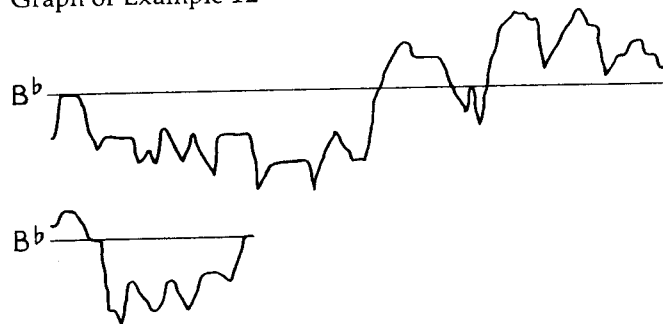
(g) Graph of Example 10



(h) Graph of Example 11



(i) Graph of Example 12



The foregoing comments summarize and the graphs illustrate characteristics of the examples and, indeed, of good melodies generally. It is admittedly easier to list the characteristics than to create melodies which embody them, because the quality of a melody is more dependent upon balance than upon the possession of specific features. Balance is essential between unity and variety, activity and repose, ascending and descending motion, conjunct and disjunct motion, cadences, and climaxes, but the perception of balance is subjective. Subjective judgments to have validity must be based on a foundation of thorough knowledge and broad experience. Instincts sharpened by analyzing and conceiving conventional melodies are readily adapted to evaluating and composing themes using expanded tonal resources and in more progressive idioms.

Suggested Assignments

1. Analyze the melodic contour and internal organization of the themes from Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*.
2. Examine early twentieth-century scores to find conventional melodies illustrating various contours. List the scores examined by composer and title. Copy the melodies and write brief analyses of their salient features.
3. Write original melodies in a traditional style, at first deliberately imitating the models. Later, concentrate on developing strength of thematic idea and effectiveness of presentation in a more personal manner.
4. Make contour graphs of the melodies written for Assignment 3 and check them for compliance with the principles outlined in this chapter. Revise the melodies as necessary to eliminate any flaws that are detected.
5. Read the chapters on melody in *The Shaping Forces in Music* by Ernst Toch (Wehman reprint).