

COMPOSITION 101 FOR MUSIC TEACHERS

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Introduction

Brief introduction and history – background as arranger and introduction into composing.

What do we start with? Melodic Material/Pre-existing Music (Find a tune!)

Reasons for the project: Why and for whom are you writing the arrangement? Does it need a certain mood?

Simplicity is a good thing...the simpler the tune, the easier the arrangement.

Original Musical Parameters of the pre-existing melody:

- Melodic Shape (global)
- Motivic Shapes (local)
- Formal Structure
- Harmonic Language
- Meter
- Tempo
- Style Characteristics (ex. Both rhythmic figurations and rhythmic interpretations)
- Intangibles (what makes it “catchy” or memorable?)

Example #1: Christmas Carol (*Veni, Veni Emmanuel*)

- Melodic Shape (undulating line vs. repeated pitches)
- Motivic Shapes (triads, m.2-3, m. 5-6)
- Formal Structure (uneven 3-measure phrases, ABCADB structure)
- Harmonic Language (modal – Aeolian, emphasis on lowered 7th)
- Meter (simple duple/quadruple with possibilities of metric variation)
- Tempo (slow to medium – allows for flexibility)
- Style Characteristics (chant-like, lyrical)
- Intangibles (repeated pitches, triumphant “peak”)

Basic Arranging Strategies

Texture (as opposed to “melody”)

What to add...what to change?

Parameters to Change:

- Melodic material & shape should stay recognizable
- Texture (how many ideas at once?)
- Form (simple - start with one or two statements of the tune)
- Harmonic Voicings/Flavor (try thinking vertically - scales - first)
- Rhythmic Motives (repetition is a good, good, good, good thing...)
- Meter & Tempo (best to choose one of each and stick with ‘em...simple)

Example #2 (Basic Arrangement)

- Quartet Rendition of *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, homophonic and heterophonic textures.

More Arranging Strategies

- Historical/Cultural Context (do you go with or against what is expected?)
- Textual Concepts (what can the lyrics of a song suggest to the arranger?)
- Rhythmic Concepts (how far can you push rhythmic interest and still keep the tune clear?)

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- Form (creating introductions, transitions, codas, contrasting sections is basically “composing”, or at least planting the seeds of composition)
- Harmonic Substitution/Voicings (examples include juxtaposing more than one scale at the same time and adding “color” notes to standard harmonies)
- Counterpoint (creating counterpoint to pre-existing melodies is usually how arrangers “discover” composing)

Example #3 (Advanced Arrangement)

- Quartet setting of *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, much more contrapuntal and complex in texture.

Taking the first steps from Arranging to Composing

- Arrangements are tied to their melodic content; compositions can be free to explore.
- Composing can be much more scary – you don’t have the “safety net” of the tune.
- Remember, simplicity still holds true for composing as well as arranging – if you start with simple material, the more options you will allow yourself to investigate.
- If you feel the need for new material, try to find the seeds of it in the material you’ve already written down – even the most innocuous fragment may spawn a host of new ideas.
- Repeating material in slightly different ways is very much allowed – and quite similar to arranging.
- Don’t worry about whether or not it’s good or not – write it down and you can always change it later!

Strategies to fight the blank page

- Techniques – Motivic Construction, Rhythmic Melody (see back of packet).
- Motivic Construction – exploring various versions of a small group of notes.
- Rhythmic Melody – using the rhythm of a pre-existing melody as the skeleton to build a new melody upon.

Example #4 (Basic Composition)

- Simple composition based on *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* for saxophone quartet.

Spreading your wings

- Compositions can be based on a very simple, abstract concept – if you can come up with a simple idea of why the piece needs to exist, you’ll have a much easier time writing it.
- Don’t be afraid to experiment – composers have been doing that for hundreds of years!

Example #5 (Advanced Composition)

- More complex composition based on *Veni, Veni Emmanuel* for saxophone quartet.

Questions, anyone?

If you do have any questions in the future, feel free to contact me at deemer@fredonia.edu!