

What makes a melody?

If you and I were talking about your music and I asked you to sing the theme or melody of your composition, would you be able to do so?

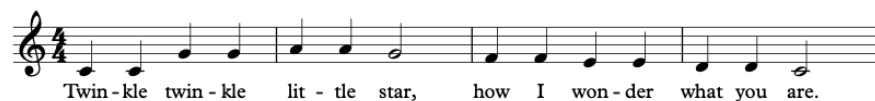
Writing and crafting a good melody is one of the most valuable skills a composer can have, and it's not all that easy to do. But with that said, there are ways to help learn to write a melody or improve a melody that you're working on.

As you read through the information below, how does it reflect in your own music? Are there parts of your melody you really love? Parts you don't like so much? Analyzing these parts of your melody while thinking about everything below can help you improve, refine and make your melody as good as possible.

To see what makes a good melody, we'll take one of the all-time catchiest tunes in the world...Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. While you likely haven't thought too much about the actual melody of Twinkle, it's pretty amazing. It's catchy, unforgettable, easy to sing, and it practically perfect in every way.

Melodic Building Blocks

What are the building blocks of a great melody? Let's take a look. After we talk about each building block, there will be a question or a tip to think about with regard to *your own* melody.



Here's the original. Such a catchy tune - whoever wrote it would be a rock star today. Now, let's take it apart bit by bit.

1. A strong sense of our home tone.

When you sing Twinkle, you're singing in the key of C major. Your home tone is the first note of your scale (C, in this case), and we can also think of it as the place where the music originates from and returns to.

A good way to start writing a melody is to begin and end on the home tone. By returning to the home tone at different parts of the melody, **especially if you approach it by steps**, you create a strong feeling of being in your home key.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
how I wonder what you are.

Up above the world so high,
like a diamond in the sky,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
how I wonder what you are.

The home tone starts and ends the melody

Twinkle starts and ends on our home tone of C, and it *feels* right.

Does your melody have a good feeling of your home tone?

Do you start your melody on your home tone?

Does your melody end on your home tone?

The second most important note in a key is the fifth note of the scale (also called the dominant). In C major, this would be G. Take a look at Twinkle and see how often the melody leaps up to a G or uses that note in general. It's a lot!

2. A balance between jumps/leaps to notes and stepwise motion (moving to notes that are right next door).

How many steps do you think are in Twinkle? How many leaps? Are the numbers similar, or does one have more than the other? Let's look!

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the song 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' in 4/4 time. Red boxes highlight specific intervals: 'leap' for the first and last notes of the first line, and 'steps all the way down' for the descending runs. A larger box at the bottom summarizes the findings.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.

Up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky,

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.

when you crunch the numbers, there are 5 leaps, 18 steps in the melody

When we look at the actual number of steps and leaps in Twinkle, we see that it is helpful to craft our melody out of **mostly steps, with a few leaps**.

Twinkle has **5 leaps**, and **18 steps** in the melody. This shift towards more steps than leaps helps keep our melodies singable and memorable.

I've replaced the steps in Twinkle with leaps in the music below. Try to sing it and see what happens...I dare you. It will almost be impossible to actually sing the melody, and even more difficult to remember how it goes.

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for the first line of 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' in 4/4 time. The melody is composed entirely of leaps (intervals of two or more notes) instead of the original stepwise motion.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.

Count the leaps and steps in your melody - how many are there?

Are there spots in your melody where it would make more sense to add in steps rather than leaps?

For those keeping score at home, we talked in the previous step how the 5th note of the scale (the dominant) is very important for establishing our home tone. Look at where all the leaps in Twinkle jump to - each one jumps up to a G, or the 5th note of the C major scale

3. A healthy amount of repetition...especially in our rhythm of the melody!

When we write music, we find the balance between repeating our ideas and creating new material as we try to create a memorable tune.

As you craft your melody, we can break it down in two elements: **rhythm and pitch**. We can often use a rhythmic repetition as a way to unify our melody and give the listener something to connect with.

What would happen if we removed all the pitch from Twinkle and just looked at the rhythm?

Twin - kle twin - kle lit - tle star, how I won - der what you are.

Up a - bove the world so high, like a dia - mond in the sky,

Twin - kle twin - kle lit - tle star, how I won - der what you are.

It's the same exact rhythm each time!

If we just look at the rhythm of Twinkle, **it's the exact same thing each time!!!** A clear repetition of long and short sounds that works so incredibly well.

Your melody certainly doesn't have to be this exact in it's rhythmic repetition, but...

Is your melody made up of a mix of long and short notes? Are all the notes one length?

If all the notes are the same length, you should add some rhythmic variety into your music.

Do you have any repeated rhythmic elements in your melody?

Is there one part of your melody that you really like? If so, what is the rhythm of that part? Often the spots we really like have a strong rhythmic aspect to them.

3a. A balance between phrases (number of measures).

When we look at the full structure of a melody, we start to see some consistent large scale rhythmic patterns. Most of the melodies we really love have a basis of a 4 bar phrase. This is a very natural feeling length, and a great thing to analyze in your own melody.

*****DISCLAIMER***** 4 BAR PHRASES ARE ONLY A STARTING POINT - EXPERIMENT WITH OTHER NUMBER PHRASES AS WELL! A GOOD 5 MEASURE PHRASE CAN BE MORE DIFFICULT TO WRITE, BUT CAN BE SO MUCH FUN TO PLAY AND HEAR

4 measures long - ends with a natural stopping point or "comma" each time

Twin - kle twin - kle lit - tle star, how I won - der what you are.

4 more measures

Up a - bove the world so high, like a dia - mond in the sky,

and yet, a final four measures for 12 bars total

Twin - kle twin - kle lit - tle star, how I won - der what you are.

Twinkle is clearly structured into 4 measure phrases, and it feels very natural to us. So much of the music we listen to is based on melodies made up of **4, 8, 12 or 16 measures**.

What about Beethoven's Ode to Joy?

2 four measure phrases!

check.

Stairway to Heaven?

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Slowly

Measure 1 Measure 2

Am Am/G# Am/G D/F#

There's a la - dy who's sure all that glit - ters is gold— and she's
sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure, 'cause you

mp

Measure 3 Measure 4

Fmaj7 G Am

buy - ing a stair - way to heav - en. When she
know some - times words have two mean - ings. In a

2 3

check.

Beat It?

BEAT IT

WRITTEN AND COMPOSED BY
MICHAEL JACKSON

Phrase # 1 - measures 1,2

MODERATELY FAST

EM D

THEY TOLD HIM. "DON'T YOU EV - ER COME A - ROUND HERE. DON'T
THEY'RE OUT TO GET YOU. BET-TER LEAVE WHILE YOU CAN. DON'T

Phrase # 1 - measures 3,4

EM D

WAN - NA SEE YOUR FACE; YOU BET - TER DIS - AP - PEAR." THE
WAN - NA BE A BOY; YOU WAN - NA BE A MAN. YOU

Phrase # 2 - measures 1,2,3

C D EM

FI-RE'S IN THEIR EYES AND THEIR WORDS ARE REAL-LY CLEAR. SO BEAT IT. JUST
WAN-NA STAY A - LIVE; BET-TER DO WHAT YOU CAN. SO BEAT IT, JUST

Phrase # 2 - measure 4

D

BEAT IT.
BEAT IT.

...you know it.

How long is *your* melody? How many measures?

Can you break your melody down into smaller phrases?

If you're having trouble with your melody and getting it to flow in a way that works for you, look at how long your phrases are. This is a great place to start.

Does it feel like you have a natural pause or breath at 4 measures? 8 measures?

EXERCISE:

Sometimes a good way to start a melody is to create 4 or 8 empty measures for yourself. Add your home tone in the beginning as your starting note, and then add your home tone at the very end as your finishing note. Then, go on a melodic journey. You begin your journey at home (your home tone), go off somewhere and do something great (taking mostly steps on your journey, but every once in a while leaping and jumping to somewhere), and finally return back home feeling very fulfilled and satisfied (coming back to your home tone).

To try so sum up what we just talked about:

A good melody will have:

- 1. A strong sense of our home tone.**
- 2. A balance between leaps and steps, but mostly steps**
- 3. A few repeated elements, especially rhythmic elements**
- 4. A balance of phrase lengths (especially 4, 8, 12, 16 bars)**
- 5. The intangibles...which means that when you hear your melody it just sounds good to you - regardless of anything else.**