

- UNDERSTANDING MELODY - AND HARMONY IN MUSIC

For Education Purposes

By Mason Kistler

- UNDERSTANDING MELODY AND HARMONY IN MUSIC -

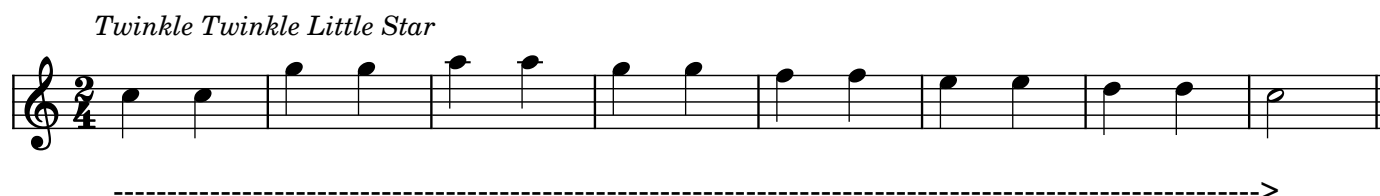
By Mason Kistler

When it comes to the intricacies of music, there are some pure fundamental ideas that set the basis for all musicians. Some of these you already know: Beat, Rhythm, Melody and Harmony. Personally, as a teacher, I teach these concepts to students from ages 5 to adults over 50 years old. In my time doing so, one thing that was curious to me early was giving consistent and easy-to-understand definitions of these concepts. Think about it, you were explained what these ideas are a while ago, but can you define and explain it to someone else? What is Beat? What is Rhythm? What is Melody?

This is where I want to start: ***What is Melody? What is Harmony?***

Melody in a basic sense is the main idea or main "theme" of a song/ piece. It is what people will remember your music by. For a second, try singing out loud, or in your head, the melody for "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star". You can easily do this as you remember the main part... the melody. As you progress as a musician, you will come to find out that Melody has a better, and more specific understanding:

Melody at a college level is defined as the Horizontal (Side-to-side) movement of music. Take a look at the following example, again using Twinkle Twinkle Little Star:



Notice how long the melody looks? It spans eight measures! Again, if you were to sing this, you would sing this version of the song... the side-to-side version. This is crucial to understanding melody. It is how the notes line up from left-to-right.

(continues on next page)

Why is it this way? Melody is also defined as listening to a combination of notes as they travel over time. Songs take time to be played. Everytime we listen to a song, we are given a playback slider which tells us how long we have left in a song or where we are currently. *(Example from YouTube)*

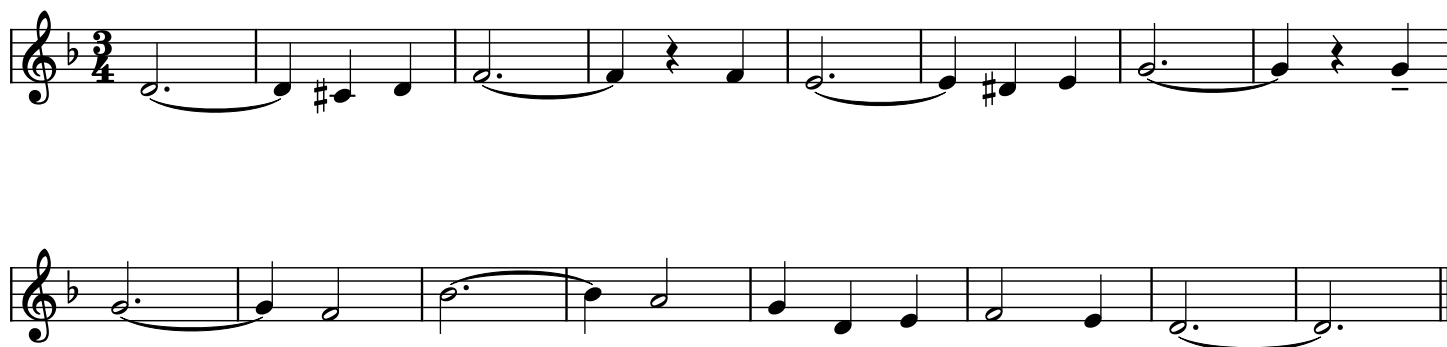


We can use this to our advantage as we can locate an iconic spot from the music. It also helps us understand that as a song progresses over time, the combination of notes we hear change. Sometimes, it's an energetic chorus, or a sad and emotion-heavy section. We can hear the music change and develop while at other times, we hear a familiar combination of notes return near the end. The melody returns again. Here's two things you can do to start listening for it:

1. When you are riding in the car with someone, and they listen to music on the radio, try to see if you the same lyrics or styles coming from the artist. Usually, in the 'chorus' section of songs, we hear the same lyrics or same instruments over and over again. An easy example is All Star, Uptown Funk or any Taylor Swift song.
2. When you are playing in band or listening to your last concert performance in band, either listen for the same pattern you did or the band is doing, or look at your sheet music and see how many times you play a certain pattern of notes. This may or may not be the main melody or it can be secondary melodies that work to support the main theme.

To finally end this point, Melody is how we view music from side-to-side. As our pieces are performed, it's this combination of notes we use to form our themes. For now, we will end with only defining it. Later, we will explore how to impliment it.

Melody from my piece: A Ballade for the Dead



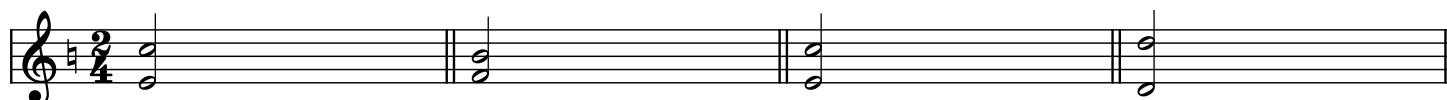
HARMONY

The next major part of this discussion is the idea of harmony. Unfortunately, this one is a little more complicated than melody, but do not fear. We will take our time to explain it!

Harmony in a basic sense, is the support to the melody. It is a combination of notes under the melody that helps create a certain appeal; whether it is an emotional or functional one. However, just like Melody, there is a more specific understanding of Harmony.

Harmony is defined to be the vertical (up-and-down) movement of music. As soon as we have two notes stacked on top of each other, we have harmony. See below:

Harmony begins with two notes stacked together



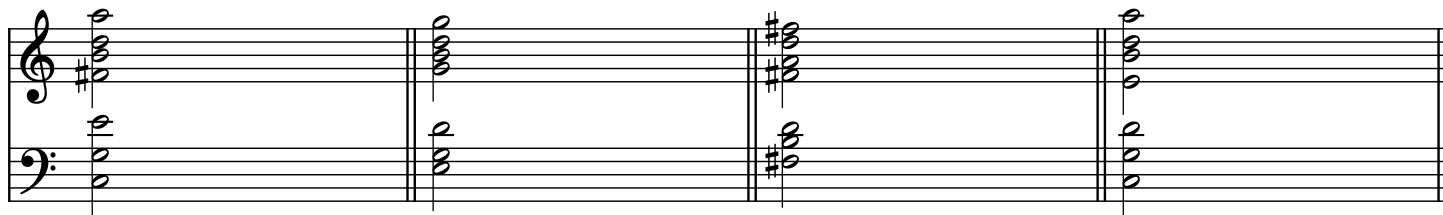
Same thing applies across multiple staves



(Continue to next page)

I'm sure you can imagine, that it doesn't simply end with two notes either.
Let's get crazy and see what we can do when we stack notes evenly on each other:

A random assortment of notes I thought sounded nice:



Already, you are probably seeing the potential. Did you also notice that this adds an emotion when you listen? Listen to it again and pay attention to how it makes you feel. It's this aspect of music we are using to create this effect...
Harmony.

Harmony is what happens when we stack notes on top of each other. You may have already heard this expressed in another way: Chords.

Chords are what we use to make Harmony have a function and purpose. Chords are defined as three or more notes played at the same time. Be clear on the definitions: HARMONY begins at TWO notes. CHORDS begin at THREE notes. Let's go and explore chords some more:

With my private students, I have found a strong way to understand chords: spelling them out. So, let's spell out all the basic chords we find in music. They are spelled from the bottom up:

G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C

Basic Chords written out:



(Continue to next page)

Before we can get into how to use both when writing, I need to explain some final things on Chords. The chords we spelled out on the previous page are not all the chords that exist in music. For this next part, I am going to assume you know what a scale and a key signature are. If you do not, do not hesitate to ask about it!

The chords on the previous page are chords only spelled out in the C-scale. This means that there are no Sharps or Flats applied to them. How do I know what the chord is if I apply Sharps and Flats? Well, remember the key signature of a song tells us what notes are effected. So, instead of only thinking things in the C-scale, let's spell our chords in the D-scale which has two sharps, F# and C#:

A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G	A
F#	G	A	B	C#	D	E	F#
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D

Chords from D-scale written out:



This is where we can get a little lost, so let me add one more condition before moving on. Please take a second and look back between the original spellings and our new ones in the D-scale. Notice how the way we spelled each chord is the same. Between both pages, a chord starting with a C on the bottom (Known as a C-chord) is still spelled with some form of "C-E-G". Whether it has sharps or flats, we still need one C, one E and one G to spell the chord.

Look at the D or G chord... A D-chord on both pages is spelled with one D, one F, and one A, NO MATTER if it has a sharp or flat. Same thing applies to all chords we find in music. They will be spelled using the same letters the entire time, but will change slightly if we add sharps and flats.

NOW, we can finally discuss how we can use BOTH Melody and Harmony when writing music. Please continue to the next page when you are ready.

WRITING MUSIC USING MELODY AND HARMONY

As we progress, I will have to make sacrifices in the explanation. We will not be learning how to write for orchestra. We will not be learning the many conditions, scenarios or possibilities we can create when writing music. Instead, let us make it easy to understand and slowly begin applying these concepts.

There are quite a few ways to approach this, and to save time, I have an, arguably, oversimplified way to grasp both. The first step should be to pick a length of a melody. Something that we can give stability to and allows us to create replicable patterns in the music. For this example, let's use a melody from your 1st Symphony.



Unfortunately, the way your melody is designed, it was really in A-minor over D-major, so I am going to use chords from A-minor to work on this. Before that, let's focus here for a second. In this example, we have a melody that is four measures long. You should use this melody as you design your music. Repeat it, break it up, invert it, it doesn't matter. This is our main theme, and what will set the design of our piece or song. Now, how do I know what Harmony to add? Well, let's spell out the chords from the A-minor scale:

E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
C	D	E	F	G#	A	B	C
A	B	C	D	E	F	G#	A



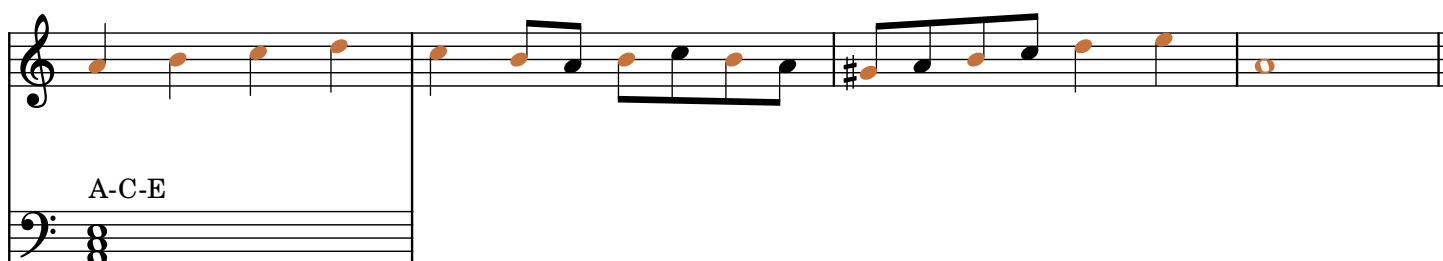
(Continue to next page)

Now, at an early level, you should pick harmony to only change on the literal beats of the music, NOT the off-beats with other 8th notes. So, let me highlight the notes that fall on to a beat:

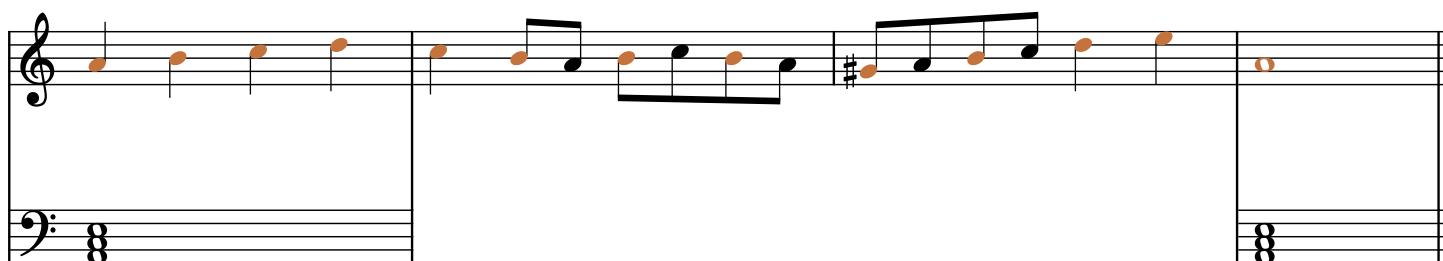


When I see it now, I know where I can change harmony in the most convincing spots. Now, you have the option to have a lot of chords or not so many. Given the context of your symphony, I think I want to change harmony less often. This means I want to use less chords over the melody versus changing chords every beat.

Finally, we can start adding chords. As a accepted rule of thumb, the first chord we will use should be the starting chord of WHATEVER scale we pick. We are using the A-minor scale, so let's pair our melody with an A-minor chord, spelled "A-C-E".



Off to a slow start. It works out in this case that we also end our melody with an A. So, I can copy the same chord so our melody ends the same way it began.



(Continue to next page)

Our next step is to decide where to place our harmony changes. For simplicity, we have the easy choices of every 4 beats, every 2 beats, or every beat. I think I want to change chords on every two beats, or change chords every half note. So, let me change how it looks so we know what notes in the melody are getting chords and where to place each chord:

Put chord here:

So, now, what chords to use... Simply put, look at the notes that are highlighted. In order, we have "A-C-C-B-G#-D-A". From here, we can reference our chord sheet and see what chords contain the same notes. In the first measure, we have BOTH an 'A' and 'C'. Isn't true that both A and C belong to an A-chord?

The answer is yes! An A-chord is spelled using A-C-E. So, for my first measure, I can simply use the same chord to add support. After this, I will want to use chords that fit best with the notes in the melody. Let's go ahead and put some chords down:

B-D-F

E-G#-B

I will end here. We have a melody with chords added. I know one extra question you will have is "why these chords versus the other chords in the scale?" I do have an answer, but I cannot write it out within a short amount of time. Please take the time to look over this and if you have any questions, let's talk about it!