

## Writing Melodies

An approach to writing good melodies in tonal music is a topic that has not been adequately stressed in most textbooks, much less codified among the many texts. If we study the vast number of melodies available to us in the tonal music repertoire we can determine a few common principles. Although there are individual features that characterize particular musical styles (viz. Classic Viennese, Baroque German, Baroque British, Bebop) or individual composers, we can summarize common patterns that occur in the expansive literature. These patterns tend to communicate lucid musical goals to the performer and listener. Hence, we might conclude that the **most successful melodies are those that convey a clear sense of direction.**

In the material that follows we will consider some general features of melodies and examine some examples from the literature. Then we will summarize some practical steps toward writing your own successful melodies.

### Musical goals

Much, not all, of the tonal literature is “goal oriented” music. The ultimate goal at the end of the piece is the arrival of tonic and the tonic triad. This is carried over to smaller sections of music as well. Each phrase, period, and section of music has a goal. In order to achieve a goal we must

- identify the goal,
- set up an expectancy of that goal, and
- fulfill the expected goal.

Identifying the goal in tonal music is a simple task after you study phrases, periods and cadences. The harmonic goal of any phrase is the closing chord (chord of resolution) of an expected cadence. This means that the “goal note” or final note of the phrase must be a member of the closing chord. If the phrase is to be an antecedent phrase, then the goal is probably a dominant chord or dominant substitute in more complex musical styles. The final note of the antecedent phrase must be in the dominant chord (*sol, ti, re*).

Now that we have discussed the role of goals in musical phrases, let’s look at a few basic features of good melodies. These features are considered within two categories, pitch (melodic line) and rhythm.


### Rhythm and meter in melodies

Begin the phrase on a strong beat. Phrases always begin on strong beats unless there is a clear anacrusis. An anacrusis requires a harmonic implication OTHER than the typical starting harmony. At the beginning of a piece for example, we expect to begin with a tonic chord. An anacrusis to that usually implies a dominant chord that sets up the coming of the tonic chord on the strong downbeat.

End the phrase on a strong beat. Another goal in tonal music is to arrive at the harmonic goal on a strong metric point (a strong downbeat). For example, arrive on beat 1 or occasionally beat 3 (weaker than beat 1) in  $\frac{4}{4}$  meter.

Keep the rhythms simple. Rhythms in melodies should be patterns that clarify the meter. Don’t use obscure patterns that confuse the listener’s sense of the meter.

Use only a few rhythmic patterns in a phrase, and some repetition of patterns where possible.

Repetition of patterns can help provide a “hook” to the listener. A hook is a “catchy” pattern that makes the listener remember. It may be melodic rather than rhythmic, but certainly a key rhythmic pattern helps such as  in some Irish folk music.

## Melodic lines

The succession of tones must have an intelligible form. If things are too erratic or don't fulfil an anticipated chordal pattern or melodic tendency (review melodic tendencies of scale degrees), the listener will not follow it. The melodic line should form a clear contour or shape. Examples will be discussed later.

Use a reasonable range. Consider the melody as something to be sung, not played. The range is best kept within an octave, certainly no more than a tenth.

Provide a clear sense of tonality. The underlying step harmonic progressions should be represented in a skeletal framework within the melody, and logical or typical harmonic progressions should be used.

Use a contrast of conjunct and disjunct motion. Diversity creates interest. Disjunct motion helps to create some tension in the line. Ultimately you want to create a little tension in the middle of the phrase to set up the repose at the cadence. This does not mean use excessive melodic skips in the middle. Be sensible. Disjunct motion is not the only way to create tension.

Use a climax. A climax is used in most melodic contours, in most phrases, and relative to set of phrases, so does a period. EACH identifiable section—phrase, period, double period, section—utilizes some form of a climax. This helps to drive the music forward for the listener.

Use ornaments to the main melodic tones. Carefully used non-chord tones create interest and diversity in melodic lines.

Use motives, sequence, repetition when appropriate. These techniques create a sense of continuity in a melody. Consider this Bach *Minuet*. Also look at the L. Mozart *Burleske* below.

The image displays two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for a Minuet by J.S. Bach, marked 'Allegretto' and 'p' (piano). It features a melodic line with a large arch over the first four measures and a smaller arch over the last four measures. The bottom staff shows a continuous melodic line with a large arch over the entire phrase.

## Melodic Contour

Melodic contour can be categorized into six basic groups:

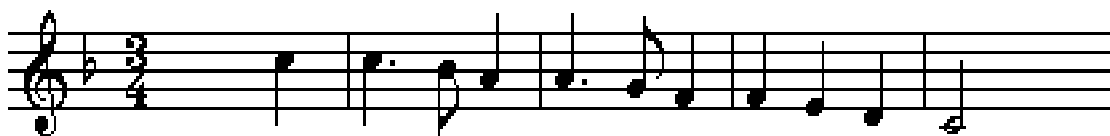
- ascending lines
- descending lines
- arch
- inverted arch
- wave
- combinations of the other four

Below are examples of these shapes. Examine each melody for all the features discussed above.

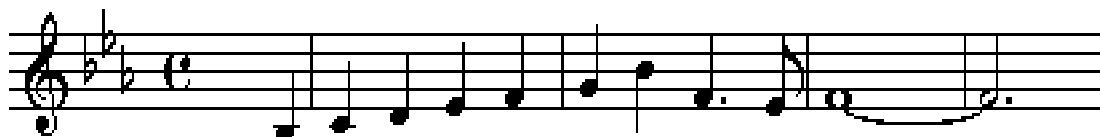
ascending line: Beethoven, Symphony No. 1, Op.21, last movement.



descending line: Mueller, *Away in a Manger*^



arch: Warren, *There will never be another you*



arch with ornamentation: L. Mozart, *Burleske*



wave: Carmichael, *Stardust*



wave with a climax: Chopin, Waltz, Op. 34, No. 2

Musical notation for an inverted arch in bass clef, 3/4 time, marked *Lento* and *p*. The melody consists of two phrases, each starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a quarter note followed by a half note, and ending with a half note. The first phrase is on a higher pitch than the second.

inverted arch: 14th Century carol, *Spring Carol* (“Good King Wenceslas”)

Musical notation for an inverted arch in treble clef, common time, marked *p*. The melody consists of two phrases, each starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a quarter note followed by a half note, and ending with a half note. The first phrase is on a higher pitch than the second.

paired arch with inverted arch: Haydn, *Austrian National Hymn*

Musical notation for a paired arch with inverted arch in treble clef, common time, marked *Maestros*. The melody consists of two phrases, each starting with a half note followed by a quarter note, then a quarter note followed by a half note, and ending with a half note. The first phrase is on a higher pitch than the second.