

**Early approaches to structure in
composition:**

**Part 1: An introduction to melodic structure,
including pupil composition task.**

Understanding and developing structure in your composition Part 1 –

Melodic structure

Let's go away from music just for a short period and examine the following:

The reflection of the sky could be seen. It was on the surface of the water. Clouds moved slowly across the mirror-like surface. They turned the water from grey, to blue, to white.

As it stands, there is nothing wrong with the extract: the English is correct, it says what it means and it is easy to understand. However, it feels a little disjointed and the lack of punctuation other than the full stop, prevents each of the sentences from having a sense of belonging.

Let's examine it again, replacing a few full stops with commas, and rearranging some of the words:

The reflection of the sky could be seen on the surface of the water; clouds moved slowly across its mirror-like surface, turning the water from grey, to blue, to white.

Now we can see that the addition of a few simple punctuation marks has lifted what is the same passage, giving a sense of direction and cohesion.

Now think about how this example can be useful in developing a sense of structure within a melodic line. A composer needs musical apostrophes, commas, exclamation marks, and a whole host of other punctuation devices to make a melody come alive. Consider the following phrase, based on a Russian folk melody:



In eight bars, it has five phrases of differing lengths: the end of the first phrase is like a semicolon, which allows the second phrase to remain a part of the musical sentence; therefore, with the second phrase, there is good a sense of balance or antithesis.

Now, lets have a look at the third phrase: again, try to envisage it in terms of grammatical punctuation. The use of sextuplets is important, since these provide a sense of forward momentum, especially when the previous phrase ended with the same note on a minim, which completely arrests the movement. Musically, these are an upbeat to the phrase, but in grammatical terms, they could be seen as an 'and', allowing the addition of a 'clause' without the splitting the whole melody into disjointed chunks. The end of the this third phrase might seem like a full stop, with the final phrase a sentence in its own right following, but keeping in terms with good literary and grammatical composition, it might better be seen as a colon, demarking the phrase, but allowing it to remain integrated into the whole.

Thus, if we were to impose grammatical ideals on the phrase, its structure might looks something like this:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, with a key signature of two flats. The first staff contains a melody starting with a quarter note, followed by a triplet of eighth notes, and ending with a dotted quarter note. A bracket above the first two phrases is labeled "semicolon or ;". The second staff starts with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a sextuplet of eighth notes, and ends with a quarter note. A bracket below the first two phrases is labeled "comma with another clause added. Same sentence, different ideas, as if 'and' has been inserted." A bracket below the final phrase is labeled "colon: demarked from the whole, but allowing the phrase to be a part of the whole musical structure."

This is an important aspect to melodic composition. A melody should have a sense of balance and belonging; its component parts should be allied to each other, so that one phrase balances or seems to grow from another. In this instance, this is achieved by ensuring notes between phrases are related in some manner, perhaps by being a part of the some chord, or related to other chords within the same key structure.

However, you might have noticed that there is also another sense of structure lying within this example. We have talked about the composition's structure, that is, four phrases connected in some manner through the use of musical 'grammatical' conventions, but there is a greater sense of balance present between the first half of the example and the second (which begins at bar 5). This is because the first half lies almost completely on the tonic chord, only moving to a new chord before the third phrase. We have likened this third phrase as a clause, a separate idea added to the second phrase, and the shift of harmony helps to convey this sense. The harmony moves more in the second phrase, going from the subdominant (chord IV) in bars 4-5, back to the tonic in bar 6, before a conventional perfect cadence (chords V - I) in bars 7-8.

The image displays two systems of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first system, labeled 'Chord I', shows a melody in the treble clef and a bass line in the bass clef. The melody consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The bass line consists of sustained chords. The second system, starting at bar 4, is labeled with 'Chord IV', 'Chord I', 'Chord V', and 'Chord I'. The melody in the treble clef features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, a slur over a group of eighth notes in the second measure, and another triplet of eighth notes in the third measure. The bass line shows the progression of chords: Chord IV in bars 4-5, Chord I in bar 6, Chord V in bar 7, and Chord I in bar 8. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

This brings to light another structural consideration: a progression of chords such as this, although simple, moves through all the primary chords, finishing with a perfect cadence at the appropriate moment, that is, at the end of the piece. Harmonic structure in melodic writing is extremely important: try to keep the harmonies simple at first, and when phrases come to an end, make sure that you follow the basic rules of harmony, using conventional cadences, which give strength and purpose to the melody.

To provide you with a little help, here is a list of cadences that can be used effectively:

Perfect, (see above example), in which a phrase's final chords are V (dominant) followed by I (tonic).

Plagal, in which chord IV (subdominant) is followed by I (tonic). This is not an effective means of ending a melody unless you have a specific reason for so doing, since it sounds incomplete. However, its 'Amen' like quality, does have an attraction. Thus, in C major, the progression would be F major-C major.

Imperfect, in which the second chord is always chord V. This has an unfinished quality, and is not a good choice for a melody's final cadence. Thus, in C major, an imperfect cadence could be the progression IV-V, that is F major to G major.

Interrupted, in which chord V is followed by chord VI. Thus, in C major, the progression would be a G major chord followed by an a minor chord.

What you can do

When writing English, you have to think about several things at a time: sentence structure is important, but so is paragraph structure. When writing music, you should think in the same way. Your musical sentence structure requires **poise**, with one phrase **balancing** with another in terms of its length and direction. Unless you have a specific reason for so doing, never allow it to become disjointed or allow it to feel out of place from the other, so that the whole thing has a sense of cohesion and direction.

Paragraph structure is similar to the harmonic structure implied by your melody. To begin with, think in terms of the primary chords (I, IV, V), since secondary chords (III and VI) can be added in later revisions. This will allow for an inherently strong harmony, which is an important aspect of any compositional exercise.