

Composition Project, Step 1: Improvise a Melody

In this first step you will write the main melody for your composition. It will be the melody for Phrase 1, and it will be the basis for Phrases 2 and 4.

Many melodies start by elaborating the tonic triad.

To improvise a melody of this sort, start by choosing a mode (major or minor) and then two or three scale degrees from the tonic triad.

Singing, improvise some music that starts by elaborating the scale degrees you have chosen and then moves on to a half cadence (probably resting on scale-degree 2 or scale-degree 7). If you have started with scale degree five, it will be easiest for later steps if it is an upbeat, not the first downbeat.

When you find a melody that you like, sing it back to yourself a few times until you have it memorized.

Often, following our musical intuitions will result in a melody that can be notated with a length of four bars; assuming that this is true of your melody, figure out what measure size would result in a length of four bars. Having figured out how many notes fit in each measure, pick note values that seem appropriate (this will give you your meter signature).

Next, sing your melody in scale degrees, and choose a key. The melody should sit comfortably in the middle of the treble staff, and the key should be easily playable.

Finally, notate the melody.

Here are two examples:

Major:

Scale degrees: 3, 5, and 3

Improvisation:

3 4 5 3 4 3 2 4 3 2 1 7 1 2
L S L S L S L L S S S L S L

Measures:

3 4 5 3 | 4 3 2 | 4 3 2 1 7 1 | 2
L S L S | L S L | L S S S L S | L

Note values: rhythm of first measure is quarter-eighth twice, time signature is 6/8.

Key: G major

Notation:

Musical notation for G major in 6/8 time. The treble clef staff shows a melody starting on G4, moving to A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass clef staff is empty.

Minor:

Scale degrees: 1, 5, 3

Improvisation:

1 5 3 2 3 4 3 2 1 7 2
L L L S S S S S S L L

Measures:

1 5 | 3 2 3 | 4 3 2 1 | 7 2
L L | L S S | S S S S | L L

Note values: first measure is two quarters, time signature is 2/4

Key: A minor

Notation:

Musical notation for A minor in 2/4 time. The treble clef staff shows a melody starting on A4, moving to B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The bass clef staff is empty.