

Boogie-woogies

Boogie-woogie is a style of blues, which developed from jazz in the early 1900s. Most popular during the 30s, boogie-woogie pieces were usually performed on the piano. Most famous for melodic ostinatos in the bass, syncopated rhythms and improvised, decorative melodies, the style tends to be fast in tempo, but simple in structure.

Many boogie-woogies follow the famous 12 bar blues chord pattern:

C	C	C	C
F	F	C	C
G	F	C	C

The bass line provides a steady, repetitive pattern, whilst the treble builds a melody using the notes of the scale, but flattening the third and seventh note. i.e. when in the key of C, the notes C, D, E flat, F, G, A and B flat are used to build up the melody. This is one of the most recognisable characteristics of blues music. To identify a blues piece of a boogie-woogie genre, you must explore the bass line. The most popular bass line used is that of the one below:



This shows the bass line in the key of C, (when in the key of D, all the notes would be transposed up one tone etc.) Other bass lines are also used, however this is the most typical. Because these bass lines are all very similar, boogie-woogies are often referred to as ‘eight-to-the bar’, when in fact it is usually in common (4:4) time.

Most boogie-woogies use constant syncopated rhythms. The effect of this ‘off-the-beat’ technique is that the piece seems faster and busier. In the bass line above, the first, third, fifth and seventh notes would be held for a little longer, whereas the second, fourth and sixth notes would be made shorter. When boogie-woogies are played at a very fast speed, the syncopation is lost because the bass line is being played at such a high tempo.

Composers and performers most associated with the style are Jimmy Yancey, “Pinetop” Smith, Pete Johnson, George W Thomas, Clarence Williams, Jelly Roll Morton, Meade Lux Lewis and Conlon Nancarrow.

Meet Frankie and Johnny

Gerald Martin

Lively

f

mf

C7

F

C

G7

F

C

C

C7

F7

C G7 5 4 F7 5 3 4 2

The first system of music features a piano introduction. The right hand plays chords in the treble clef, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment in the bass clef. Chords are labeled as C, G7, and F7. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5.

C E F F# C

ff

The second system continues the piano introduction. It includes a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic marking. Chords C, E, F, and F# are indicated. The right hand has a melodic line, and the left hand continues the accompaniment.

C7 8' F7 1 2

The third system shows a C7 chord and an 8' octave marking. The right hand has a melodic line, and the left hand continues the accompaniment. Chords C7 and F7 are indicated.

C G7 4 F7

The fourth system continues the piano introduction. Chords C, G7, and F7 are indicated. The right hand has a melodic line, and the left hand continues the accompaniment.

C6 C7 Cm6 F7

The fifth system features chords C6, C7, Cm6, and F7. The right hand has a melodic line, and the left hand continues the accompaniment.

D7 Fm6 C C9

The sixth system features chords D7, Fm6, C, and C9. The right hand has a melodic line, and the left hand continues the accompaniment.

Performance: Meet Frankie and Johnny

Meet Frankie and Johnny, by Gerald Martin, was the piece I decided to perform in my chosen genre. This piece was published during 1966 as part of a musical in which Elvis Presley starred. The piece had lyrics which are shown below:

*“Frankie and Johnny were sweethearts
Oh and how they could love
Swore they will be true to each other
True as the stars above
He was a man
But he was doing her wrong*

*I ain't gonna tell you no stories
I ain't gonna tell you no lies
I saw you man Johnny
But the Malibu door with the gal name
Nalie Klye, he was your man
But he was doing you wrong”*

The movie follows the relationship between a man (Johnny) and his girlfriend (Frankie). The purpose of the composition of the song was to provide the musical with a recognisable theme-tune, whose lyrics summarised its plot.

The boogie-woogie's treble has been taken from this original song and this is the piece's melody. The bass line is the typical 'bass ostinato' discussed previously. The piece too, follows the 12 bar blues chord pattern. Although not specified, I decided to play the entire piece in syncopation – during performance this worked well because it made the piece seem 'bouncier' and more rhythmic.

I tried to pay attention to the indicated dynamics, especially at the beginning and end. However, I found it difficult to emphasise the dynamics because there were many crescendos and no diminuendos which meant I had to get constantly louder. If I abided by the dynamics completely I would have ended the piece at fortissimo (*fff*) because after the crescendo from forte to fortissimo, there was no prompt to get quieter in order to accentuate the last crescendo.

The bars which I found most difficult to play were 12, 14 and 18; this was because it was hard to come in between the second and third beats after the rests I had just had. I overcame this problem by watching my left hand and remembering which note I played in the bass.

Another problem I faced was the last eight bars. After having played the last bass ostinato, I was left with my little finger playing the lower C. All the Cs in the last eight bars are accented and it was difficult to play them loudly with my little finger.

I increased in speed during the piece which is very easy to do when playing boogie-woogie because of the tempo they start at, so if I was to repeat my performance I would practice more with a metronome before hand.

Despite these problems, I think my performance went well and I was generally pleased overall with how the performance went. I think the main purpose of arranging this popular piece in a boogie-woogie style was to give the piece a bit more flavour and pizzazz and I think I fulfilled the task of giving the piece that vitality.

Comparison of 3 Boogie-Woogie Piano Pieces

I will be comparing three pieces of music in the style of boogie-woogie, one of which will be the piece I decided to perform – Meet Frankie and Johnny. The other two pieces I will be comparing are:

- **Deep Blue Sea Boogie**
- **Old Joe Clark's Boogie**

I will firstly look at their bass lines. All three pieces have different bass lines, however they all keep the same bass line throughout (with the exception of the use of occasional minims in Deep Blue Sea Boogie), transposing it with chord changes. Each of the bass lines are all made up of bars of two sets of four quavers. Old Joe Clark's Boogies is the only bass line that is repeated twice in one bar. Deep Blue Sea Boogie and Meet Johnny and Frankie both have a repeated bass line which is one bar long.

I will next consider the chords and keys. As already discussed, Meet Johnny and Frankie follows the regular 12 bar blues chord structure. Old Joe Clark's Boogie's bass line is constantly in the key of C – as is the majority of the melody, however, several different chords are used on the treble to compliment the bass. Other chords used are F, C7, G7, B flat, D flat 7 and C9. Deep Blue Sea Boogie is mainly in G and A minor, but as like Old Joe Clark's Boogie, it uses occasional chords in the treble to compliment the bass line.

Dynamics are all very similar in the three pieces, the only dynamics indicated state to play mezzo forte, forte, fortissimo and fortitissimo. Crescendos are used in all pieces.

None of the pieces state a tempo at which the piece should be played at, however Deep Blue Sea is described as 'moderately lively', Meet Frankie and Johnny is described to be 'lively' and Old Joe Clark's Boogie is described to be 'very lively and bouncy'. Because these three pieces were composed by the same person, we can assume that the Old Joe Clark's Boogie should be the most liveliest and so perhaps the fastest.

All three pieces have times when the melody is playing a series of minims, a series of crotchets and a series of quavers. This means they also a varied texture. When quavers are being played in both clefs, a busier, thicker texture is created, whereas when minims are played, a thinner, clearer texture is created.

They all have similar pitch ranges – of about three octaves, however, Meet Frankie and Johnny has the widest rang of pitch – its lowest note being G – (11 tones below middle C) and its highest note being C (3 octaves above middle C).

Deep Blue Sea Boogie is the longest piece as it uses repeats, however all three pieces are about 40 bars long (without including repeats).

My preferred piece is Meet Frankie and Johnny because it seems a lot more busier and colourful than the other two pieces. There is more variety in the melody and lot of interesting sounds are played. I like the length of the piece as it is reasonably short. There is a wide range of pitch and this contributes to making the piece sounds more interesting.

Composition Brief

After having explored three different pieces of boogie-woogie and learnt the typical characteristics, I will now compose my own piece of music. I have decided to use the 12 bar blues chord pattern - the piece will have the typical 'bass ostinato' shown earlier, following this chord pattern:

C C F C G F C

Boogie-woogies tend to be quite busy, colourful and usually quite fast too. Decoration is also used a lot in boogie-woogies, both of these techniques I am going to incorporate in my piece.

My piece will start by introducing the bass line so the audience will get a feel for the chords and tempo. Gradually I will add notes that will fit with my bass line and develop these notes into a melody. When in the key of Cm, the notes C, D, E flat, F, G, A and B flat are regularly used to build up a melody. I will try to change the tempo during the piece – making it suddenly faster and slowing down at the very end will sound quite effective. During the first phrase of the composition the texture will be quite thin, and as the piece progresses, the texture will increase – this texture variance is also typical of my genre.

Composition: Minor Boogie

After having composed my piece I was satisfied with it – I wanted to improve it but couldn't due to lack of time. I wanted my composition to be longer and I wanted to achieve this by extending the ending as my piece ended quite abruptly. I followed my composition brief quite accurately but didn't decide that I would write the piece in a minor key until I had finished the composition brief. I am aware that it is not typical of my chosen genre to write in a minor key, however I wanted to explore a different idea and this made my piece sound more original. I used a typical bass line, which I transposed each time I change the chord:



I managed to incorporate the texture ideas I mentioned in the composition brief, which was also typical of my genre.