



The importance of melody

Melody is a series of notes of varying pitches, organised and shaped to make musical sense to the listener. Music is made up of ingredients and some people would say that melody is the most important one. Melody may best be described as what you find yourself humming when a piece of music is brought to mind. When people comment that they "can't get that tune out of their head", they are referring to melody. Many people regard it as the most essential ingredient in music (Sir George Martin said 'Melody is the single most important element in music'). It is why we remember great music, as it is often the most memorable aspect (it sticks in your head the most) and can evoke a wide range of emotions. Melodies can make us happy or sad, and they can be very thought-provoking, the listener's response being a wholly personal one (everyone has a different opinion because a piece of music may make musical sense to one listener but me a meaningless jumble of notes to another. Also what may make one person express their emotions may leave another totally unmoved). Melody itself has many characteristics and is built up with a number of different things.

Parts of melody

A melody is characterised by a number of elements, namely:

- shape / contour (the rise and fall of the notes)
- range of notes used (difference between the highest and lowest notes)
- intervals used (does the melody move mostly by step, leap, or a combination of both)
- structure and phrasing (this may involve repetition and/or variation of distinctive note-patterns, sequences, cadences, answering-phrases, climax of the melody)
- the type of scale on which the notes are based

Contour

Contour or shape is the rise and fall of the notes, the way in which—now upwards now downwards—they curve along in musical space and time. Some pieces of music have steep contours and others flatter ones. For example the first part of Greensleeves has a contour like this:



Range

The range (lowest note to highest note) can be narrow (small range) medium (medium range) or wide (large range). For example 'Panorama' from the ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*, by Tchaikovsky uses a narrow range of notes whereas Symphony No.4 in E minor (first movement) by Brahms uses a wide range of notes. The range affects the way in which we portray the music (how it makes us feel) and whether it is cold or warm. The range can be used in many different ways to create different images. Most melodies move by a balanced mixture (balance makes music better. The more balance the better the music), for example Minuet from the 'Surprise symphony (No. 94 in G) by Haydn uses a balanced mixture of steps and leaps.

Intervals used

This is whether the melody moves in steps or leaps (or a combination of both). It affects the way the music sounds (rough and jagged or smooth and flowing). For example 'Panorama' from the ballet, *The Sleeping Beauty*, by Tchaikovsky moves in steps whereas Symphony No.4 in E minor (first movement) by Brahms moves in leaps.

Rhythm

A melody is a series of notes of varying pitches (pitch describes how high or low a note is). As well as deciding what notes to use, the composer must decide how long each note will last. This makes *rhythm* an integral part of melody-writing. Stevie Wonder said 'Rhythm is the basis of music. Melody is the starting point'. *Harmony* also plays an important part, as melody notes chosen at cadential points (ends of phrases) will be determined by the scale chosen by the composer. Rhythm gives the melody character. Rhythm is vital. A melody would be unrecognisable without it. It isn't the actual notes played but the time (duration) in which you play them. Notes have different durations in melody. Accents over notes indicate where to stress. Two good examples of Rhythmic pieces are Prelude to the opera 'Carmen' by Bizet and the 'Tiger Dance'.

Structure and Phrasing

The famous English folk melody 'Greensleeves' (which is more than 400 years old) has 4 phrases and is structured in binary form (in 2 sections: A and B). The melody is based on notes from the Dorian mode (you can hear what this mode sounds like by playing D to D on only white notes of the piano).

Speed

The speed is very important and can change the whole sound of a song.

Type of scale

There are many different types of scales. Here are some of them:

Modes

These scales formed the basis of early Church music. Modes are essentially a series of pitches rising in steps, from a note to its octave. The name and character of the mode is determined by the order of tones and semitones within the series. Some modes are the Dorian mode (gives medieval sound), the Phrygian mode (based on E. It is the next next one up from the dorian mode. It is all the white notes up to E and back down again. It is typically Spanish) and the ionian mode (based on C).

Major and minor scales

The majority of Western tonal music is based on these scales (which developed from modes). In all *Major* scales, there are semitones between the 3rd and 4th degrees, and the 7th and 8th degrees above the tonic, the other degrees being separated by whole tones. In any *Harmonic Minor* scale, there are semitones between the 2nd and 3rd, the 5th and 6th, and the 7th and 8th degrees, while there is an augmented 2nd between the 6th and 7th. The other degrees lie a tone apart.

Chromatic scale

A chromatic scale divides the octave into twelve equal steps of a semitone each. Twentieth century 12-note serial music uses all the notes of the chromatic scale, often avoiding giving priority to any one of them.

Pentatonic scale

The pentatonic (5-note) scale is used in much European folk music, especially Scottish (e.g. 'Auld Lang Syne'). Types of pentatonic scale form the basis of the musical styles of many other cultures, e.g. China, Japan, Thailand, Indonesia and parts of Africa.

Whole-tone scale

This consists of 6 notes only, a whole tone apart, spread equally across the octave. This scale contains no semitones, Perfect 4ths or Perfect 5ths, thus bringing a mysterious quality to the music. Some composers of the late 19th Century and early 20th century made much use of this type of scale, e.g. Debussy. It is also used a lot in pantomimes.

Scales using intervals of less than a semitone

These occur in the music of other cultures, notably in South Asia. A few western composers have also employed this technique, dividing the octave into 19, 31 and, in the case of Harry Partch, 43 intervals! Modern electro-acoustic devices can also produce variations in pitch as small as the ear can perceive.

Conclusion

All in all no one can argue that melody is one of the most important ingredients (or factors) that make up music. All speech is music. Every word has pitch and rhythm. Billy Joel said 'A good tune will give rise to beautiful words'. He also said 'Music is a block of marble and you have to get inside and see what the sculptor is'. In Beethoven symphony no.5 the melody just cries out above everything else. Music is a very large and complex topic. Even though melody is important it is just one of the many things that are all required to produce good music. In my personal opinion I believe that melody is in fact the single most important element in music.

