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What is the process of songwriting and composition

Composing and songwriting are both the process of creating new music. They are essentially the same thing, but composition tends to mean instrumental or classical works, while songwriting is more contemporary music with lyrics. Composing is, in many ways, the ultimate expression of your musicianship. Depending on how involved your composition is, it can be the most demanding, and rewarding, musical activity you will ever undertake. The first inspiration for a piece of music can take many forms, and every composer or songwriter has a different technique to get from the inspiration to the completed piece of music. However, all musical creations share four main aspects of composition which need to be developed along the way. These can be shown in a hierarchy, each supported by the one underneath it. 1. Lyrics - These are the words of the song. Obviously this is missing in instrumental music. Lyrics are usually sung and so require a melody, except in styles such as rap, where the lyrics are spoken. 2. Melody - This is tune, or main theme, of the music, which tells the musical 'story'. While it is often considered the essence of a musical creation, the melody sounds incomplete without harmony behind it. 3. Harmony - This is progression of the chords in the music, which provides the distinctive background for the melody, giving it strength and context. It is a crucial element of any composition. 4. Structure - This is how the sections of a song are arranged around each other. It often involves the repetition of familiar themes in verse and chorus sections to create a consistent but varied dynamic throughout the song. Finding and developing original musical ideas is a constant challenge, even for advanced musicians and experienced composers. This tutorial looks at all four aspects of composition shown above, with a particular focus on melody and harmony, and the tools that music theory offers you to make the creative process richer and easier. Underlying many of these tools is the concept of chord and scale relations, so make sure you have understood the earlier tutorial which covers this concept. Create Music with Songtrix Bring these music concepts to life with the free Songtrix Bronze Edition as you create songs from chords and scales. Then publish and share your ideas with the other musicians you meet on the ChordWizard Network. Have questions? Join the ChordWizard Network and post them in the Music Theory forum for answers and discussions on your topics of interest. More Info Download Take the Video Tour Topic 107 of 117 This step-by-step songwriting guide will give you everything you need to start—and finish—your songs right. Already have some song inspiration? Perfect. Let's get started with this step-by-step songwriting guide. Download the Chord Progressions MIDI Pack and Ableton Live project template to follow along with the video. 1. How to start a song Before you start writing you need to loosely define what you'll be making. I don't mean setting up a strict script to follow. But asking yourself these key questions before you start will help to guide you early on. What are my songwriting tools? I don't mean pick every instrument right away. Good songwriting means being able to move between all instruments. But choosing one instrument to start with is a good idea. Traditionally a piano or guitar are the songwriter's weapon of choice. But a drum machine, a synth VST or a MIDI controller are all good places to start too. Start with what you know best. Ideas come out easier on what you're comfortable with. Know your songwriting tools first, and write a song second. Will there be lyrics? If there will be lyrics in your song, start with writing a few ideas out. It doesn't have to be in song structure (we'll get to that later). But a few basic concepts will help get you started. A great tool for lyric ideas is a rhyme dictionary. It might sound simple, but when you're just starting out they're great for finding inspiration. Write out your lyrics with the instrumentation in mind. Sitting by a piano or with a guitar can help you to understand your lyrics better. If you 'play your lyrics,' parts of the whole song will start to emerge. Lyrics will also give you a core idea for your song. Once you find the idea you're going to riff on (literally) then the other parts will fall into place more easily. All language is music. The best lyrics unlock the music in all spoken word. Don't stress about knowing how to write lyrics. The best way to write lyrics is whatever feels right for you. What is my song topic? A song should answer a question. Ask and answer it with the parts of your song. Put your questions and answers right in you lyrics. Or make it the answer to a question you ask yourself. Like "what does it sound like if I..." or "how can I make this idea into a sound?" are good places to start. It might sound corny, but good songs need substance. That means emotion, mood, feeling, risk and experimentation. So what makes you feel a certain way? What emotion will you get out through your song? Music is more engaging if your lyrics and sounds are genuine. If you don't feel anything from your own music, how is anyone else suppose to feel something from it? So create something real. All those daydreams and space outs you've been having are songs waiting to get out. Ok great. Now you have an idea of where you want to go with your song. And you know what songwriting tools you'll be using. Let's get started! 2. Make a rough draft Knowing how to write a good song means finding a rough idea to build around. Don't have something in mind right away? No worries. Take your instrument of choice, hit record and start sketching. You'll be surprised how quickly a song idea will pop up. "Don't edit your first idea. Make sure your first idea is always there." -Bruce Roberts You don't need to have a fully written song in your head before you start writing. Just make a small jam session, play it back and see what stands out. Not sure where to start? Hot tip: Stay away from writing 'parts' immediately. Once you have a sketch, it's simple to go back and find the parts that sounded good. 3. Find your song idea The hardest part of writing a song is getting started. Pulling ideas out of thin air is really difficult. But it doesn't have to be. Every song has a central topic. Starting with a main concept will make getting started a breeze. Go back to the sketches you recorded or wrote down. Find the parts of a song that spoke to you the most. Songs are usually born from random ideas that you build around. Your main song ideas can be anything. Once you have your best song idea everything else will fall into place. Your main idea that you sketch out is the foundation that you build on. So start sketching! Parts of a song Before you start building around your song idea you have to know the parts of a song. They're the building blocks you'll be working with. You don't have to use all of them. And how you arrange them is up to you. But at the very least you need to know what they are. Verse, Chorus and Bridge There are 3 main parts of a song: The verse, The chorus and the bridge. They are the building blocks of song writing. Here's what each part is. Use them to craft your next masterpiece. The verse is the part of a song that propels your song idea forwards. If you think of a song like a story, the verse is the passage that builds the suspense and action. Remember, you don't need lyrics to tell a story. It can be a progression in your leads, creative drum layering, or any interesting combination of sounds. Each verse typically changes each time it pops up in your song. The melody in your verse should ascend towards and lead seamlessly into your chorus. A chorus is a piece of a song that typically repeats a lyric, idea or passage in between each verse. It is sometimes called a refrain as well. The chorus typically occurs after a verse. While verses vary in their structure, a chorus tends to repeat the same idea. A good chorus is memorable and catchy. It also states the main idea of your song. Because the verse builds up to the chorus and is normally repeated multiple times during a song, it is often the most recognizable part of a song. That's why it's usually the chorus you sing or hum when a song gets stuck in your head. In music, the bridge is the section of a song that contrasts the rest of the composition. The bridge is a great way to move away from your central song idea. Choose a melody and chord progression that contrasts your verse and chorus. The bridge typically sits between a chorus and verse. When the bridge is over, the original structure—either a verse or chorus—comes back in. This will make the listener want that juicy hook or chorus back after the bridge. So give it to 'em! The Pieces of Your Song Parts The verse, chorus and bridge are the main parts of your song. But there's a couple other parts you need to know before you start writing. Key is the group of notes that your song is made up of. The tonic or root of your key determines the scale of complimentary notes that you'll use. Check out our guide to the circle of fifths if you need to brush up on your key signatures. That means melodies, chords and even bass lines will all be made from that scale. Knowing basic music theory is vital for success when it comes to song writing. So take some time and learn the fundamentals. Melody is a sequence of single notes that make up your lead line. Think of it like the theme of your parts. It's what defines the mood of your track. Depending on what genre you're working in, melody can take on many forms. But melody usually dictates the color or tone of a song section. Melody most often refers to the top line of a song that is joined with background elements like percussion. Often it's a vocal or lead instrument that carries it. A hook is the part you end up humming in the shower. It's the ear worm that get's stuck in your head. Hooks can be a small melodic passage, part of a solo, lyrics from the chorus, a backing vocal or absolutely anything else from your song. The hook is what makes a song catchy. Good songwriting always has good hooks. You should craft each part with a hook in mind. Writing your first verse? There should be a hook there. Working on the chorus? There should be a hook there too. 4. Pick your song structure Now that you've found your main song idea, and you know the song form basics it's time to beef it up a bit. Your central idea is a stepping stone to the rest of your song. In this section you'll learn how to turn your rough draft into a structured song. The best song structure for your project will all depend on what kind of song you are writing. For example: if you're writing a pop song, your structure will vary slightly compared to writing an EDM track. But there are basic structures that apply to most popular music these days. Song structure There are obviously tons of ways to arrange a song. How you arrange yours is up to you. But there are common song structures that are good to work with if you're just starting out. The most common song structures are: The best song structure to start with The most important parts to start with are your verse and chorus. Get to know those first then move on to other sections. Once your ready, it's time to fill out the rest of the structure. There's one structure that's simple, straightforward and gives songs a nice sense of narrative and suspense. It makes your ears beg for certain parts. It takes you on a little song journey. It's the structure that defines catchy. It goes: Pretty simple right? This structure is everywhere in music history. And y'know why? 'Cause it works! You might be thinking to yourself "most songs are in that structure? Well that's boring." But the truth is, this structure leaves a ton of room to create in. There are infinite sounds to put into this song form. So experiment with each part to make it work for you. EDM song structure EDM song structure works in a similar way to the structure I talked about above, but with a couple of changes. It goes: These sections work even without lyrics. A chorus doesn't need vocals. Make it a catchy repeated synth lead instead. EDM has a ton of room to work within the common song structure. Maybe your track will have a thumping bass line through the whole song that never changes. But the parts on top shift and change. Or you can keep your lead the same and turn your percussion sections into a verse, chorus, etc. It's up to you how you work inside the form. 5. Build from song ideas Ok, now that you know the parts of a song and song structure it's time to start writing! Building around your song sketch means adding on the other parts to compliment it. Is your sketch a sweet hook? Then it's time to figure out where it fits. It could be in the chorus, or even the bridge. Is your rough song idea a couple perfect lines of lyrics? Choose where they'll go. Maybe they'll fit in the second verse. No matter where you decide to put your first idea, deciding where it fits in your structure will help you to build around it. For example: if you use your main idea to build your first verse, then it's easier to flow into the first chorus. Each part is a stepping stone that leads to the next. So drop your doodle somewhere and start building! 6. Finishing a song So now you have your song idea in place, you know all the parts you need and you've picked a structure. Superb. At this point there is infinity ways to reach the finish line. It's the magic that makes songwriting so special: there's no 'best' way to do it. "You can't say 'how do you write a song?' It just comes out. Everyone has their own process." - Bruce Roberts When it comes to song writing, Bruce Roberts couldn't be more right. The best songwriting process is YOUR OWN process. The only way to figure it out is to take time, sit down and build it. Hopefully there's a lock on your studio door! Download the essential songwriting checklist And make sure your song has everything it needs to be great! Remember that it won't always be easy. Sometimes songs flow right out. Other times they need some coaxing. If you get stuck or are feeling lost there's a whole heap of songwriting tips that will help you get over the hump. Songwriting exercises These songwriting exercises will help you get over creative blocks, build ideas, and stay inspired. Imitate. Then make it your own Timeless songs last for a reason. The best way to write a song is to listen to how the greats did it. "Good songs take on different meanings and different lives forever." -Diane Warren Listen to your favourite song and ask yourself what makes it so good? How is it arranged? What are the parts? Hum the melody, or better yet play it! Once you have a good understanding of it, try to create your own melody that fits. If you start with the best and then riff on it, chances are you're gonna wind up with gold. Listening leads to creating. Some of the best songwriters listen to other music before they even pick up the pen. Like Tom Waits' trick. He plays 2 different radio stations at once and listens for interesting overlaps. Or Bob Dylan's process. He starts every songwriting session with a few minutes of deep meditation while listening to a song that inspires him. There's a whole world of weird songwriting tips out there that legendary musicians swear by. Remember, there's a difference between inspiration and ripping someone off. Get influenced, but always make it your own. So listen to the greats and you'll have tons of ideas to roll off in no time flat. Remember in grade school when you'd have to memorize all the parts of a story? Like 'rising action' and 'climax.' Or maybe you weren't paying attention cause you were too busy listening to your mini-disc. Either way songs are stories. Applying the narrative arc to your songwriting is a perfect way to make your song more interesting to the listener. Use each section to create suspense. Build your song up to a climax. Hint at certain parts coming up to keep the listener glued to the headphones. The narrative arc looks like this: Applying the narrative arc to a common song structure would look something like this depending on your parts: Another way to use your influences is to map out how your favourite song works. You need to know how to use active listening to do it. Grab some paper and a pen. Make a diagram of a song that resonates with you. Try to jot down every part of the song that I mentioned before-verse, chorus, bridge etc. This will help you to picture the structure of your favourite song in a visual way. Hot Tip: If I really wanna know how a song works, I sometimes put it in my DAW software and slice the waveform up into each distinct part. Not only do you see each part, but you can follow the waveform to see how the dynamics work in each section. Then I color code each part to understand which part is which. As the play cursor moves along I look and listen to see where each part changes to the next. It's like Where's Waldo? for music. Except it's more of a 'where's the nuggets?' kind of thing I guess. mind and everything will fit like peas in a pod.x Find your songwriting partner Think Jimmy Page and Robert Plant. John Lennon and Paul McCartney. Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. The list goes on... Millions of good songs were written by teams. Get a collaborator. I don't know about you, but personally the thought of being locked away alone in a room trying to write a song sounds pretty difficult. Partners are perfect for pitching parts or bouncing ideas off of. Plus 2 or more people means at least twice the ideas. And twice as fast at finishing. If you've already been writing songs a partner will also spice up your sound a bit by bringing new sounds to the table. So collaborate and double your songs! Y'know what the best way to find out if your song is good or not? Play it! During the songwriting process it's super easy to get lost in your sections. Or lost in diagrams and arrangements. Check your song often and just listen. Playing a part you're stuck on often leads you to that next note because your brain automatically wants to hear that next part. It wants progression and wants to fill in the pattern organically. So play what you've got as much as you can while you're writing. It might even mean repeating the same part over and over and over. But most times you'll be surprised how fast those roadblocks all just fade away... One song is never enough Now that you have all the tools you need to write songs there's one thing left to do: Write a ton of songs, record them, mix them and master them! The only way to become a good songwriter is to write all. the. time. "Just keep doing it. That's how you get good. That's how you get great, and stay great." -Diane Warren. Grammy Award winning, multi-platinum songwriter. A good rule of thumb is to have a song on the go at all time. Or better yet have 3. When it comes to learning more is always better. Let yourself fail. Let yourself succeed. Know when to say yes and when to say no. With these songwriting tools anything is possible. Your next great song just needs that one last important ingredient: The doing. Just never give up! Songwriting Tools The Method Behind The Music Dictionary - A handy music dictionary for figuring out what all those music terms mean. Autochords - Chord suggester tool for finding progressions and patterns. Uberchord - Guitar teacher app for learning guitar chords with real time feedback. Multi Track Song Recorder - A superb four track recorder songwriting app. Great for jotting down ideas when on the go or as a companion to your actual songwriting process. Evernote - Evernote is a notebook app perfect for jotting down, collecting, and saving all your songwriting ideas no matter where you are. You never know where a song will strike. So be prepared. LANDR - LANDR is perfect for sharing song drafts privately to get feedback. Comment directly on the waveform to point out specific parts or areas where you think might need work. Rhyme Zone - Free rhyming dictionary for all your lyric writing needs. Hum - Hum is a recorder and note taker all in one! It organizes all your ideas by key, mood and tuning. It costs \$2.99 but it's well worth it for the organization. Lyricsmith - Lyricsmith is a free app for songwriters that includes a rhyme dictionary and handy organizer that makes all your lyrics searchable. Chordbot Lite - Chordbot lets you create, arrange and test out chords and chord progressions during your process. Plus it's free! Reader Interactions

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