

## Technique 2

### Theme and Variation

One of two states often confronts a composer. Either you can't think of a melody or you admire a melody someone else has written and would like to write something similar. What to do??? The answer is **BORROW**.

Mozart and just about every other household name among the major composers did this. You can too. Start with a melody you know. Use elements of it as the theme of your composition and vary pitch, rhythm, meter and any other aspect of the composition. Allow someone else's successful work to drive your own creativity.

Still not convinced this technique is valid? Check out Mozart's 1778 collection of twelve variations on *Ah, Vous Dirai-je, Maman*. That's the name of the French tune he thought was a nearly perfect melody. You know it as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. The collection remains in the standard repertoire for piano students.

#### Example 1 – On Top of Old Smokey

Look at the folk tune On Top of Old Smokey and *thoroughly* familiarize yourself with melody and chords. Be acutely aware of the melodic contour of the tune. For the technique of theme and variation to be successful you **MUST** really know the original tune.

#### Harmonic Variation

The mood of the tune can be significantly altered by selecting a different set of chords. Often the new chords change more frequently than the original. If you are not familiar with the guidelines for chord substitution read the companion piece titled "Introduction to Harmony Theory." That short piece will show how to derive a chord substitution box. The answer for the key of G is below. Each melody tone can be supported by one of three chords. One of these choices will be clearly wrong. Either of the other two chords will support the tone. One will clearly work and one may fundamentally change the way listeners hear the melody.

This technique is valuable to instrumentalists who may find it a good way to lead into or close a familiar tune or to create a unique musical break in the center of a performance.

Review the variations of *On Top of Old Smokey*. Track the chord alterations from the G Ionian version to the second version titled Harmonic Variation. In the traditional G Ionian version the traditional G, C, D chords appear. In the Harmonic Variation you will find G, Em, Bm, Am, and CMaj7. The melody has not changed. The difference is the harmonic tapestry on which the music hangs has changed dramatically.

### Chord Substitution in the Key of G

If the Melody Tone is	Choose One of These Chords
<b>G</b>	<b>G</b> [G-B-D]
	<b>C</b> [C-E-G]
	<b>Em</b> [E-G-B]
<b>A</b>	<b>A</b> [A-C#-E]
	<b>F#m</b> [F#-A-C#]
	<b>D</b> [D-F#-A]
<b>B</b>	<b>Bm</b> [B-D-F#]
	<b>G</b> [G-B-D]
	<b>Em</b> [E-G-B]
<b>C</b>	<b>C</b> [C-E-G]
	<b>Am</b> [A-C-E]
	<b>F#dim</b> [F#-A-C]
<b>D</b>	<b>D</b> [D-F#-A]
	<b>Bm</b> [B-D-F#]
	<b>G</b> [G-B-D]
<b>E</b>	<b>Em</b> [E-G-B]
	<b>C</b> [C-E-G]
	<b>Am</b> [A-C-E]
<b>F#</b>	<b>F#dim</b> [F#-A-C]
	<b>D</b> [D-F#-A]
	<b>Bm</b> [B-D-F#]

#### Change of Mode

Changing the mode of a melody will dramatically alter how listeners perceive the tune. Review the score of *On Top of all Smokey in All Diatonic Modes of G Tonality*. Play through each mode to hear how the melody changes.

#### Time Variation 1 – move to 4-4 time

On the page titled *On Top of Old Smokey – Variations* look at the third variation titled “*Harmonic and Time Variation*”. What is different about this version of the melody is that the time signature has changed from the original waltz meter of 3 – 4 to a ballad meter of 4 – 4. The overall contour of the melody is not radically changed. However, unless the listener has been told that the melody was derived from *On Top of Old Smokey* it is highly unlighted that they will hear any connection.

The technique for creating the time variation is to find the essential contour points of the melody and to preserve these in the transformed melody. So the high G in measure two of the original also appears in the variation. The D of the sixth measure of the original appears in roughly the same place in the variation. The variation has more passing tones and runs to fill out the melody.

### **Time Variation 2 – move to 9-8 time**

The final variation shows how the 3-4 waltz of *On Top of Old Smokey* can become an Irish slip jig in 9-8 time. The technique for the transition is the same. Set the new time signature and respect the general contour of the original melody. Use passing tones and scales to connect the defining points of the contours.

Each of these cases respects the style of the new tune. In the first case the new style is either a ballad or an air. That suggests a slow tempo, lots of emotive chord choices and some bit of flash in the new melody that does not occur in the straight forward original. In the second variation the new style is a jig. Lots of eighth notes. *On Top of Old Smokey* becomes a busy piece.

Is either of the variations of the original tune still *On Top of Old Smokey*? Not really. The original tune was the inspiration of the new tunes. Both of these variations are truly new melodies.

### **Example 2 – Banks of the Scamander**

When the mode of the Irish waltz *South Wind* is changed from its traditional Ionian mode to Aeolian mode AND a brief interjection of the harmonic minor scale is used at the end of the tune AND the time signature changes from 3-4 to 6-4 the result is a melody that sounds like nothing you would expect to hear in Ireland.

Follow the lead sheet for *Banks of the Scamander* and you will see that it is largely the melody of *South Wind* raised by one tone. That puts the new tune in A Aeolian mode. That mode shares a key signature with the key of “C” – no sharps, no flats. Usually this mode is simply called “A minor.” The natural minor produces a sad, soft melody and harmony. I decided to punch this tune and used the harmonic minor on the tune. That permits use of the E major chord. So the tune can use the major V chord on the tonic chord of A minor and also employ the F chord. These chords are powerfully related. The choice of the time signature as 6-4 allows a different rhythmic feeling for the tune. While this change was not necessary, it does enhance the difference between *South Wind* and *Banks of the Scamander*.