

Guidelines for Good Melodies

Five Tips to Keep You out of Trouble

1. Honor the rhythmic conventions of the style of the melody.

A jig is not an air. A waltz is not a hornpipe. Unless you are writing for comedic purposes, hold to rhythmic conventions that define the style in which you seek to write.

2. Use extreme tones sparingly.

The highest, or sometimes the lowest, tone of a melody should generally occur only once during a melody.

3. Write smooth melodies

Good melodies are, for the most part, smooth. They don't have wild leaps between tones. Generally good melodies employ intervals of 2nds and 3rds mostly. Use of 2nds and 3rds is called "stepwise motion." The larger the interval the less frequently it will appear in a good melody. The large intervallic leaps generate drama. And there is only so much room in a tune for drama.

Here's how the intervals are used in melody:

- 2nds, 3rds and 4ths are the most common intervals in music.
- 5ths are a powerful interval often used to introduce or end a phrase.
- 6ths are less common than 5ths and tend to be soft and a little sad
- 7ths are extremely rare. But they are not uncommon when used as the tension

tone to resolve a passage. For example a melody might flow from F# to the G immediately above it (half step). But, a melody going from G to its 7th (F# above) would be most rare.

- The octaves can be very effective. Think of *Over the Rainbow* from the Wizard of Oz movie. The opening word "Somewhere" is an octave interval. If you use an octave interval it must be followed by a smooth, stepwise melodic line that moves in the opposite direction from the octave leap. If the octave interval is internal to a melody, it should be preceded by a smooth, stepwise melody. Again the direction of the stepwise melody should be opposite to that of the octave leap.

4. Respect the rules on how to resolve melodic tension

- The 7th degree of a scale (the leading tone) *tends* to resolve to the tonic pitch
- In a major-sounding key, the 4th degree of the scale *tends* to resolve to the 3rd degree of the scale.
- If a melody alters the key signature by adding accidentals, resolve a sharp upward by a 2nd and resolve a flat downward by a 2nd.

Melodies can tease a listener on occasion by ignoring these guidelines. But eventually a tune should come to rest on the tonic at the end or some other restful place inside the melody. These three guidelines help achieve that with melodious effect.

5. Limit the tonal range

A melody generally confines itself to within about an octave and a half, perhaps as much as two octaves. An instrumentalist may perform the melody in different octaves.

However, the span of a good melody is nearly always less than two octaves.