Creating Harmony – The Basics of Arranging

The task of making an arrangement out of a single-note melody seems formidable. Where to start? Work out the harmony and chords? Think about playing technique? Find spaces that allow dramatic runs or cadenzas to be inserted??

Well, yes. All of these. But a good place to begin is with a technique called blocking the melody. This technique will reveal essence of the melody. That essence, or contour, will also show the options for chord structure and identify where embellishments might be placed.

Here's how to do it.

Five example files accompany this post. The melody used in the example is Neil Gow's tune *Farewell to Whiskey*. Open the files in this order as you work through this topic.

1. Find the contour of the melody.
All melodies have shape. They go up and down in pitch and these changes happen within a specific structure of time. Identifying the contour of the melody creates a bounded canvas on which an arranger can work. Once the contour is revealed, an arranger can: choose an appropriate harmonic support structure, write phrases that augment the melody and specify performance techniques.

Open the file labeled 1a Melody of Farewell to Whiskey.pdf to see the melody of the tune.

A. Eliminate ALL pick-up notes. All of them.

B. Re-write the melody so that only the tones that appear ON THE BEAT are shown.
In a 4|4 tune that means each measure would have no more than four notes and could have as few as one.

In a 3|4 tune a measure would have not more than three and as few as one.

A 6|8 tune poses somewhat of a dilemma. Is the tune counted in 2 or 6? If the melody is played such that each beat is felt as the pulse of the piece, then the music will show no more than six eighth notes. But if the pulse of the tune is 6 beats counted as 2 (as is done in a jig), then the piece has no more than two dotted quarter notes. The six eighth-notes in a measure are played as though they were triplets on a beat of two. In this blocking procedure, we are looking for the contour. Those two tones in a 6|8 piece will do it.

The same is true for a slip jig. The time signature 9|8 and the pulse is three. So a 9|8 tune would have no more than three notes and no fewer than one.

C. Convert all tones to the time value of the time signature.
In a 4|4 melody the contour tones are quarter-notes, half-notes or whole-notes
In a 6|8 melody with the pulse of a jig, the contour tones are dotted quarter-notes.
In a 3|4 melody all of the contour tones are quarter-notes.

When a beat contains two tones, say two eighth-notes in a 4|4 piece use the first tone of the pair and turn it into a quarter-note.

Open the file labeled 2a - Blocked Melody of Farewell to Whiskey.pdf

2. Place the melody on your instrument.

3. Harmonize the melody contour using 3rds below the melody

Open the file labeled 3a. Harmonized melody of Farewell to Whiskey.pdf

4. Listen to the quality of the harmony
Without fail some of these 3rd harmonies will not sound good within the context of the melody. In those spots where the harmony doesn't sound right, drop the harmony tone down to produce a 4th harmony.

5. Pick the harmonies and choose the chords.
Each of the harmonies will suggest two or three chords that would work to support each contour point. Of course, "work" is not to be confused with a good aesthetic choice. Some choices will be better than others.

For example, let's suppose that a melody contour tone is "B". That is harmonized by the "G" a 3rd below. G and B are members of the G-chord and the E minor-chord. The mood of the piece will guide the selection. Many times an unexpected chord will be selected. That sort of choice can create a unique and memorable arrangement.

This step requires that the arranger understand how chords are spelled, how to voice chords, and what chords are appropriate within a key. If you are weak on these points, put some study time into chord spellings and chords and keys. Try this link to chord basics for a starting point.

Open the file labeled 4 - Chord Choices of Farewell to Whiskey.pdf

6. Examine the Melodic Contour for Opportunities.
The search is for space and drama. Space can be filled with arpeggios, scales or cadenzas. The melody can be augmented by scales, short enhancing phrases, and broken chords. Many times the best choice is to allow the power of silence to take charge. Fill as you will.

7. Return to the original melody and make decisions about playing techniques.
With the chords in place and places identified for inserting dramatic effects, return to the full melody and make decisions on playing techniques. Each melody tone does not require harmonic support. In fact, too much is not a good thing. Decide on flams, arpeggios, simple 3rd harmonies. And don't forget that many times dropping the 3rd harmony into the octave below opens the sound and can produce a stunning effect. See measure 15 for an example of this technique.

Open the file labeled 5a - Arrangement of Farewell to Whiskey.pdf

That's Blocking.

The blocked version and the harmonized version of the melody should be identical for everyone. Although the chord options will be identical for all arrangers, the chord choices should differ significantly. Performance techniques selected should vary widely from one arranger to another.

The arrangement shown in the file should be considered an example that employs many techniques. The first pass through the tune would never be as completely worked out as this lead sheet. If that was done, the player would have nowhere to go! Save the dramatic performance techniques and chord choices for the final pass.

The final pass through the tune calls for a D7sus4 chord in measure 15. This chord is played under a "fermata". That's a symbol telling the player to suspend time and "hold" the note. This is the final dramatic moment of the piece. My arrangement calls for a highly tensioned chord and I always do an extensive arpeggio on it. The D7sus4 chord is spelled: D G A C. This form of the familiar V chord generates a huge amount of tension that sets up the listener to thoroughly enjoy the resolution provided by the I chord.

This technique will make an arranger out of you! Give it a workout on your favorite, moderate-tempo melody.