

Technique 1

Creating Melody from Words

Composers often create melodies to deliver lyrics. Here is an example of how to generate original motives and melodies from words.

For this example the lyric is:

“Oh, no!”, said the moon.
“You know time means nothing at all to me now.
I’ve seen kings sail by on their golden thrones.
Seen their ivory ships become worn out scows,
And little children loose a million balloons,
While lonely dogs sing me a tune.”

The inflections given by the speaker to the words of the lyric create melody. You might say “oh, no” with a rising inflection. That might indicate surprise. But just as likely you might choose to say “oh, no” with a falling inflection. That might indicate concern.

So, it goes with every line of the lyric. HOW the reader says the words will determine the flow of the melody.

Here is the process for turning a lyric into a melody.

1. Read the lyric aloud. Pay exacting attention to the pitch of the words and the duration of each syllable. It can help to record the reading so that you can play back what you said in order to carefully analyze pitch and duration

2. Make a sketch of how the lyric was read. The y-axis represents pitch. The x-axis represents time. Quantize the length of the lines, that is, fix their durations, to some standard lengths. These lengths will be arbitrary. However, it is important to transcribe the relationships between the durations of various syllables with reasonable accuracy. The key is to get the relationships among the various durations to reflect what was actually spoken.

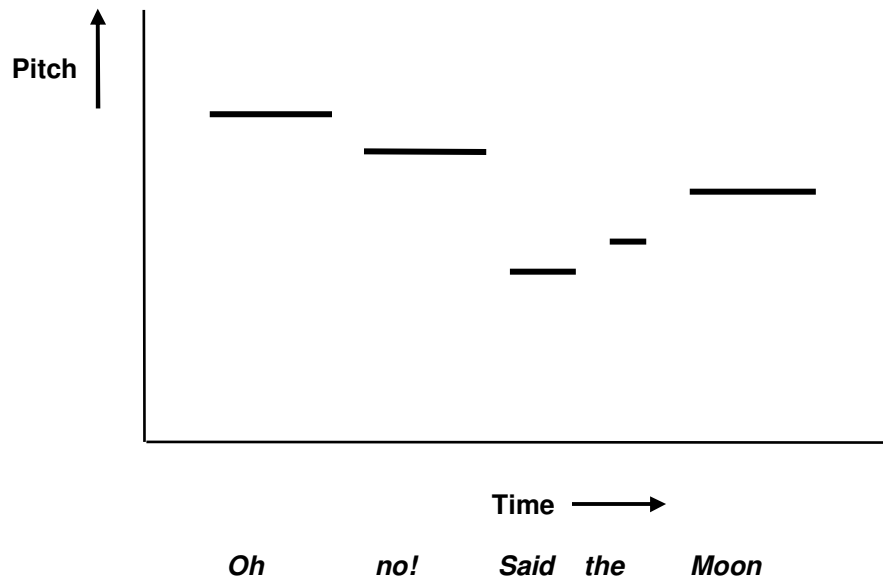
3. Translate the sketch into pitch and time values on the musical staff.

Now let’s apply the process to the lyric of *Said the Moon*. I read the lyric into a recorder. I listened to HOW I read the lyric several times taking careful note of pitch changes and the duration of syllabus. Then I made a sketch of how I read the lyrics. I had to listen to the entire lyric and then go back and listen to it carefully line by line. It is important to get the entire range of pitch into your mind before you begin to sketch. Each line of the lyric has to integrate into a coherent melody.

Technique 1: Melody from Words

Page 2 of 3

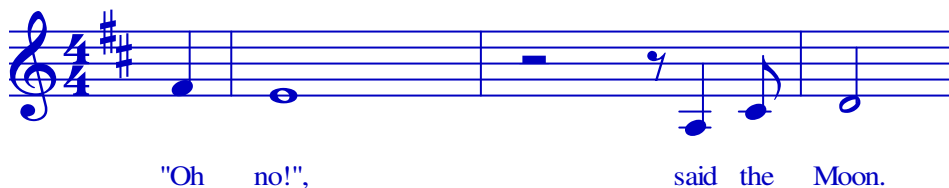
Here is the sketch of how I recited the first line of the lyric



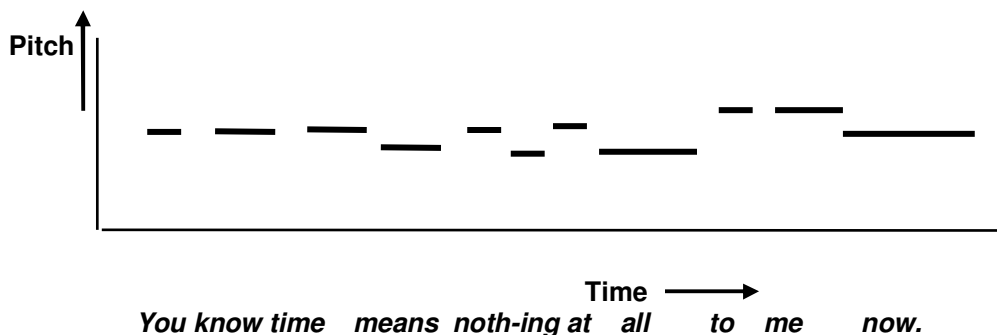
This sketch can be transformed into music. The shortest length line is an eighth note. The longest is a whole note. Quarter notes and half notes fall in between. The lowest y-value should be the lowest pitch in your vocal range or the scale in which you want to compose the melody.

To get the melody the way you want it will require several passes during which duration and pitch are tweaked to get exactly what you want.

The sketch of this first line became this melody.



The sketch for the second line of the lyric worked out like this.

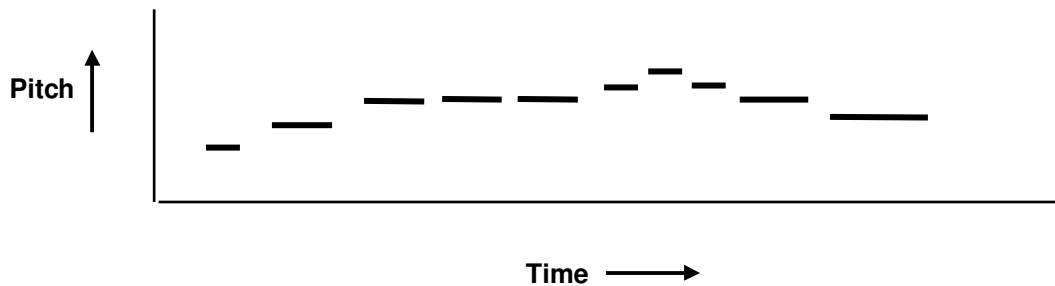


This sketch becomes this musical phrase.



"You know time means noth-ing at all to me now.

The sketch of the third line became.



I've seen kings sail by on their gol - den thrones

The music for this sketch is:



I've watched kings sail by on their gol-den thrones s

The procedure is tedious at first. But the effort produces very good results. Often you will find melodies that might never occur to you as you noodle or improvise on an instrument. All of us tend to quote ourselves and reproduced favorite riffs when we play. But reading the lyric breaks the confines of the instrument. If you can't create an energetic reading of the lyric, ask someone else to read it and record their performance.

Remember this approach is an approximation technique. You will need to refine, adjust and tweak time and pitch values to create exactly what you want. The final melody may not be an exact replication of the reading.

I'll leave the balance of the lyric as an exercise for you to complete. Or use a lyric that you have written or poem you enjoy and work through this procedure. It is a very productive method for creating fresh melodies.

The full lead sheet of *Said the Moon* is in the appendix.