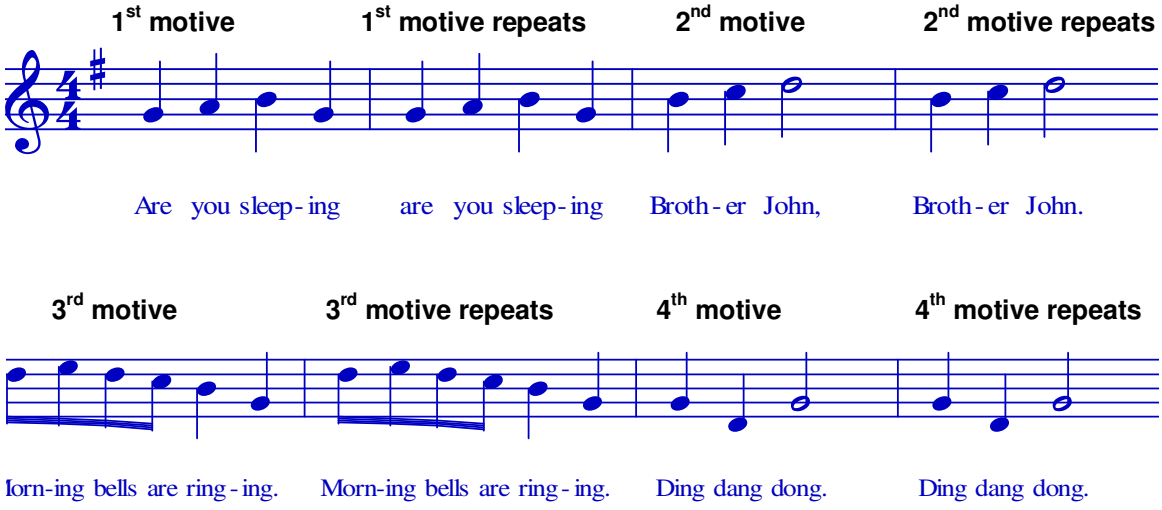
Technique 5
Motive

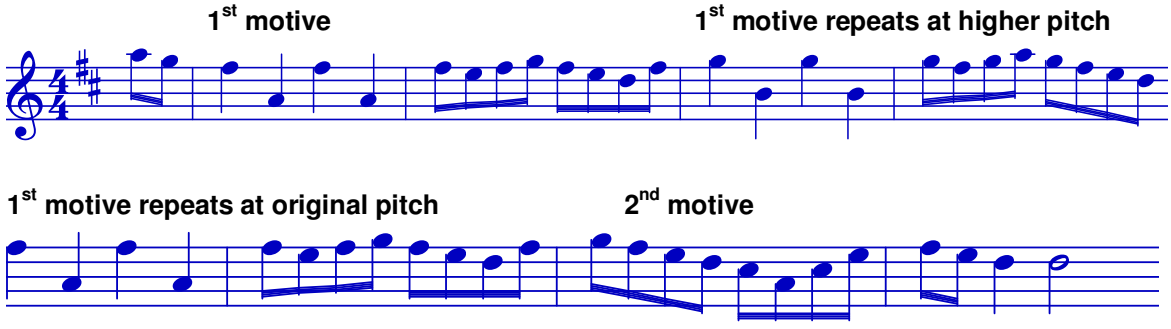
Most composers say that they begin work with bits and pieces, fragments, random flashes and elements of nature they stumble upon. Their job is to form these chunks of creativity in to a coherent whole. In music, these little chunks of creativity are called "motives." The French version is "*motif*" and you'll hear classically trained music use that term. No matter what we called it, the motive is the smallest complete musical thought that can be formed. The key word is "complete". Think of a motive in the same way you think of a phrase in the English language.

Examine the nursery rhyme *Are You Sleeping* to see a clear example of motive.



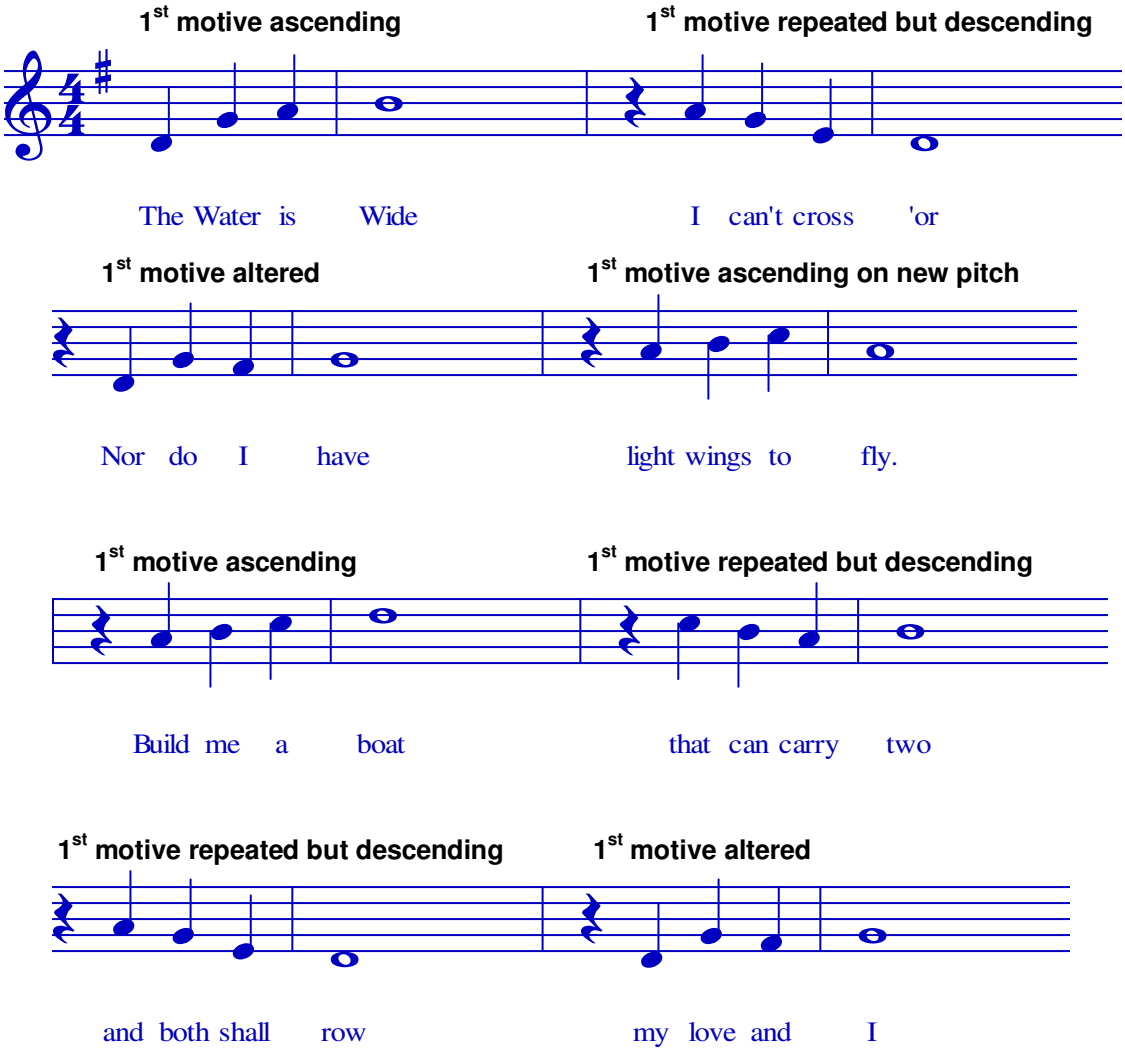
So our old friend *Frère Jacques* is really four short motives.

This analysis works for a more complex melody to. Here are the phrases in part A of the American fiddle tune Liberty.



While it may seem as though *Liberty* flies and spills out new ideas in every measure, the truth is The A part of *Liberty* consists of only two, not very complex, motives.

Look at the Scots-English ballad *Wally Wally* or *The Water is Wide*. Note the melody has been simplified a bit to make the discussion clearer.



The Water is Wide is a tune with a single motive: three quarter notes followed by whole note. The motive rises and falls and its tonal pattern is altered in two measures. However, this much loved ballad is built on a single motive.

Notice how in each of these examples, repetition of a motive is the key characteristic of the melody. In *Frère Jacques* the repetition is exact. In *Liberty* the repeated motive begins on a higher pitch. In *The Water is Wide* the repetition is faithful, but variable in pitch, throughout the composition. File away the concept of repeated motives. Repetition of a motive, however it may be modified, is a major compositional tool.

The meaning of the examination of three successful melodies is:

If you can write a motive,
you can create a successful melody

For more information: www.billtroxler.com and BillTroxler@verizon.net

The task ahead is to learn how to create a motive and how to modify it so that when it is repeated it sounds new to the listener.

Guidelines for creating a motive

- Decide on the musical scale for the composition. Major or minor? That sets the tonal context for the motive. If you are unfamiliar with the modes of the diatonic scale, take time to learn about the most useful modes: Ionian, Dorian, Mixolydian and Aeolian modes.

- Decide on the style of the composition. This decision will help to determine, tempo, form and meter. Is the composition a ballad, lament, jig, reel, hornpipe, march, strathspey, an air or some other form?

- Successful motives exhibit smooth transitions between tones. Melodic intervals are generally 2nds and 3rds within a motive. The larger the interval between tones the less often it will appear in a melody. If a large interval between tones goes up, the melody following it should go down and use small intervals in the melody. The reverse is true. A melody with a large interval jump down in pitch should be followed by a melody that goes up in pitch using small intervals.

- Intervallic jumps of a 3rd or greater may occur between successive motives

- A complete melody is a series of motives. One motive, and often the penultimate motive, will contain the highest pitch of the melody and that may involve a jump of an interval larger than a 3rd.The highest pitch of the entire melody should occur only once. There are exceptions by not many.

The Germ

The smallest unit of coherent musical thought is called a germ. Good motives always contain clear germs that are repeated. They serve has memory hooks for listeners. Here are a few examples.

- In *The Water is Wide*, the germ is three ascending or descending quarter tones.

- In *Liberty* an essential germ is the repetitive quarter notes that appear in measures 1, 3 and 5.

Many Celtic waltzes use a germ consisting of three notes: dotted quarter, eight and quarter note. Here is that germ within the Irish waltz South Wind.

The entire melody of South Wind is formed from this repeated germ. This three note germ appears twice in each motive. The three note germ appears in approximately 50% of all the measures of the tune! See the full lead sheet for South Wind in the appendix.