

3

Melody



A MELODY IS A SUCCESSION OF TONES LOGICALLY CONCEIVED TO MAKE MUSICAL SENSE. Just as words, varied in sound and meaning, are arranged in a particular order to form a sentence, the tones of melodies, varying in pitch and duration, must be organized in order to be meaningful. Western music lovers particularly listen for melody, responding to its sensuous appeal and its indefinable power to stir the emotions. Simple folk tunes and popular tunes lighten our cares, and many of us find our lives immeasurably enriched by appreciation for the great melodies of the world.

As Figure 3.1 indicates, a written melody forms a linear pattern on the music staff. We may trace a melody's distinctive shape, or contour, by drawing a line from note to note; in fact, we think of melody as horizontal or linear and speak of a "melodic line." Melodies such as "Yankee Doodle" (Figure 3.1a), whose tones are close to one another on the staff, form a smooth, or stepwise, contour, whereas wide skips between the tones in melodies such as "The Star Spangled Banner" (Figure 3.1b) yield a melodic contour more angular, or disjunct.

A melody, again like a sentence, consists of one or more **phrases**. Melodic phrases are punctuated by stopping points, called **cadences**, which—like commas, semicolons, and periods—indicate varying degrees of pause or finality. The melody of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," for example (Figure 3.2a), consists

"Yankee Doodle"



a

"The Star Spangled Banner"



b

figure 3.1

(a) Smooth (conjunct) melody line, with tones close to each other. (b) Disjunct melody line, with tones widely separated from each other.

figure 3.2
Three ways of
setting simple texts
to music.

- a Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream.
b Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.

a

- a Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way.
b Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.

a Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way.

b' Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.

b

a Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa la la la la la la la

a 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la la la la

b Don we now our gay apparel, fa la la la la la la la

a' Troll the ancient yuletide carol, fa la la la la la la la

c



of two unlike phrases (*a* and *b*), the first generally ascending and the second generally descending in pitch. (You can hear the melodies in Figure 3.2 at the Online Learning Center.) For the chorus of “Jingle Bells” (Figure 3.2b), which has four lines of text, the first phrase is repeated for the third line of text, and the second phrase is altered for the fourth line, in the order *a b a b'*. (The prime mark after *b* indicates that the phrase has been slightly altered.) The melodic phrases of “Deck the Halls” (Figure 3.2c) occur in the order *a a b a'*. Perhaps you can think of other simple melodies and identify their phrase patterns using letters of the alphabet in this manner.

The second phrase of “Three Blind Mice,” a repetition of the first melodic phrase at a higher level of pitch, is an example of melodic **sequence**, a readily identified technique encountered in all kinds of music. Consider the four-note pattern that begins Beethoven’s Symphony no. 5 (*da-da-da-DUM*; see Figure 3.3), which then is repeated at a lower pitch level. Another example is found in “America”: the phrase “Land where my fathers died” is succeeded by “Land of the pilgrim’s pride,” again at a lower level of pitch. The opening phrases of Tchaikovsky’s *Trepak* (Listening Example 2) also illustrate melodic sequence. You will hear numerous examples of this simple means of giving both variety and symmetry to music, in every kind of song and instrumental music you enjoy.



figure 3.3
Motivic principal theme of Beethoven's
Symphony no. 5.

While all melodies share certain characteristics, each is distinguished by its particular rhythmic patterns, phrase structure, contour, and other qualities, which combine to form a wide variety of melodic types. For example, we sometimes refer to a melody that seems complete in itself, and is easily remembered and sung, as a **tune**. Folk and popular songs are generally tuneful, as are some famous melodies from great symphonies, operas, and other serious works. A tuneful melody may consist of any number of phrases, and its contour may be either smooth or disjunct. The melodies in Figure 3.2 may be called tunes.



MELODIC TYPES

A **theme** is a melody—tuneful or not—that recurs throughout a piece in its original form or in altered forms. For example, consider how the musical theme of a movie is changed to suit the moods or situations of the film. The main melody of Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Listening Example 1) is an example of a theme.

A **motive**, or **motivic melody**, is a short melodic phrase that sounds fragmentary or incomplete in itself but is suitable for many kinds of variation and development. *Trepak* (Listening Example 2) begins with a motivic melody. Most famous is the four-note motive beginning Beethoven’s *Symphony no. 5* (Figure 3.3). These four tones hardly constitute a tune, and they seem too fragmentary to be called a theme; yet Beethoven found in them the rich source of much of the melodic (and rhythmic) material of this famous symphony. (Benjamin Britten’s *The Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra*, Listening Example 5, begins with variations on a *theme* and concludes with a section based on a bustling *motivic* figure.)

A **lyrical melody**, longer than a motive, is often songlike in character. In a composition of some length, a lyrical melody is usually repeated, with or without variation, rather than developed in the intellectual manner of a motive. Some lyrical melodies are tuneful, while others—such as in Samuel Barber’s lovely *Adagio for Strings* (Listening Example 60)—are too long and complex to be considered tunes. All of these terms, as you see, are somewhat subjective.

A melody is built on tones selected from an ascending or descending pattern of tones, within the range of an octave, called a **scale**. The word “scale” is derived from the Italian word for staircase, and a scale, like a staircase, is a series of steps. In Western music, as noted in Chapter 1, the steps correspond to the keys of a keyboard, a *half step* being the distance from any key on the keyboard to its nearest neighbor (white or black, up or down), and a *whole step* being the distance of two half steps. (See Figure 3.4.) The number of possible scale patterns, defined according to the number and pattern of the half steps, whole steps, or both, is virtually unlimited.



SCALES

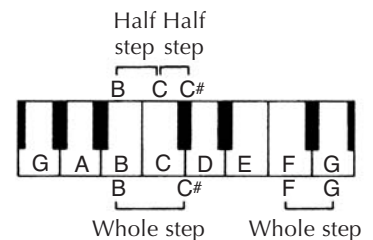
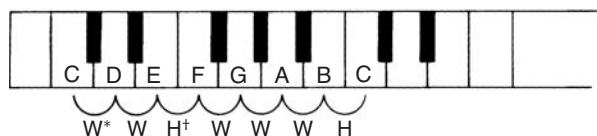


figure 3.4
Keyboard showing half steps and whole steps.

Major and Minor Scales

The scales most commonly used in Western music—the major and minor scales—each contain five whole and two half steps, but the order



*Whole steps †Half steps

figure 3.5

The white notes of the octave from C to C on the keyboard correspond to the pattern of the major scale.

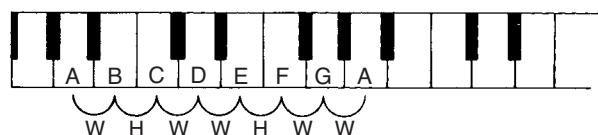


figure 3.6

The white notes of the octave from A to A on the keyboard correspond to the pattern of the minor scale.

in which the steps are arranged differs significantly, so that the major and minor scales sound quite different from each other.

The ascending pattern of steps in the **major scale**, probably the most familiar in Western culture, is *whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half*. (See Figure 3.5.) The tones of most melodies do not occur in the same order as the scale on which they are based, but “Joy to the World” begins with a descending major scale, and “Do, Re, Mi” from *The Sound of Music* describes the ascending version of that scale. (The syllables *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, and ti* heard in that song correspond to the seven scale tones.)

The ascending **minor scale** pattern of steps is as follows: *whole, half, whole, whole, half, whole, whole* (see Figure 3.6). The Civil War song “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” is based on the minor scale, as is the first movement of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 (see Figure 3.3).



The most significant difference between the major and minor scales is the third step, which is a whole step in the major scale and a half step in the minor scale. The words “Johnny comes marching home” in the first phrase of that song are sung to the first three pitches of the minor scale; the words “Doe, a deer” from the song “Do, Re, Mi” are sung to the first three pitches of the major scale. Try singing the word “home” (from “Johnny”) a half step higher, or the word “deer” (from “Do, Re, Mi”) a half step lower, to hear how much the particular scale affects the sound of the music. (You can hear the major and minor scales at the Online Learning Center.)

Tonic Note

The first and last note of either the major or the minor scale is called the **tonic**. Thus C is the tonic of the major or minor scale that begins and ends on C. In a composition based on the major or minor scale, the tonic usually is heard more often than any other note, and as you play or sing up or down either scale, you will feel a kind of magnetic pull to the tonic. For this reason, major and minor melodies, like the scales they are based on, sound incomplete until the tonic note is sounded. To illustrate this, try singing the last phrase of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” omitting the last note.

The tonic on which a composition is based is also the name of the **key** in which the piece is composed. In other words, a piece based on the C major scale is said to be in the key of C major. (Although you will not need detailed knowledge of such technicalities, this brief explanation may demystify such terms when you see them on a concert program or on a recording of classical music, for example.)

Chromatic Scale

While the major and minor scales are most familiar to Western ears, much music, popular and classical, is based on other scales. The **chromatic scale** (see Figure 3.7), composed entirely of half steps, often achieves a poignant emotional effect, as in Listening Examples 32 (Schubert's "Erlkönig") and 40 (Wagner's "Liebestod").



figure 3.7

The chromatic scale consists of twelve half steps.



Whole-Tone Scale

The **whole-tone scale** divides the octave into six consecutive whole steps. (See Figure 3.8.) The absence of half steps, whose proximity to the next tone implies a leading or leaning toward it, gives whole-tone music a quality of endlessness, which composers often use to achieve a dreamy, ethereal effect. The French composer Claude Debussy, whose music we will study in Chapter 25, often used the whole-tone scale to achieve vague and dreamy effects in his music.

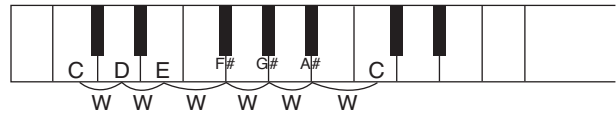


figure 3.8

The whole-tone scale consists of six whole steps.



Pentatonic Scale

While any five-note pattern within the range of an octave may be called a **pentatonic scale**, the particular pattern formed by playing up or down the five black notes on a keyboard is a very popular scale on which many simple melodies are based. (See Figure 3.9.) The "gaps" in these melodies, due to the step-and-a-half between some tones, seem to lie comfortably in our voices and are characteristic of many folk tunes and children's songs. "Merrily We Roll Along," "Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen," "Oh! Susanna," and "Old Folks at Home" are among the innumerable tunes that may be played entirely or for the most part using only the black notes on a keyboard. "Amazing Grace" (Listening Example 3) is a particularly beautiful pentatonic melody.

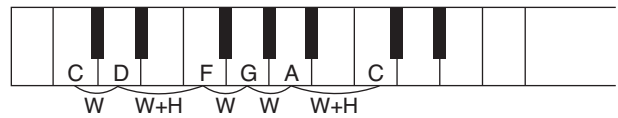


figure 3.9

This pentatonic scale may be played, starting a half step higher, on black keys only.



Listening Suggestion Just as it is not necessary to count beats to enjoy rhythm in music, neither must you necessarily analyze the scale on which a melody is based. Rather, as you expand your awareness of the materials of which music is made, you will probably find yourself noticing, with less effort as your experience increases, rhythmic, melodic, and other effects that enrich your pleasure in listening.

The meaningful succession of pitches we call "melody" provides the linear aspect of music. Melodies have distinctive outlines or contours, which may be



SUMMARY

LISTENING EXAMPLE 3

“Amazing Grace”

Composer: Anonymous

Genre: Folk Hymn

Meter: Triple

Tempo: Slow

Singer: Judy Collins, a folksinger who became popular in the 1960s and remains well-known and well-loved today.

Text: The words were written by John Newton (1725–1807), an English evangelist overwhelmed with remorse for his earlier life as a slave trader. The song promises God’s forgiveness, even for such a “wretch” as he.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind, but now I see.

The haunting melody, using only the tones of a pentatonic scale, seems equally suited to express grief and joy. It is frequently heard at weddings, for example, and at funerals as well.

conjunct (stepwise) or disjunct (with wide skips between tones). Tuneful melodies are easy to recognize and to sing. Fragmentary or motivic melodies offer rich potential for development. Lyrical melodies are songlike and seem relatively complete in themselves. A theme is a melody that recurs, in the same form or in altered form, throughout a piece or a section of a piece of music. The scale on which a melody is based affects the emotional as well as the aesthetic character of the music.

CRITICAL THINKING

- Compare a melody you like with one you don’t care for. How do they differ? What is pleasing to you about one of the melodies and unsatisfactory about the other?
- Why do some melodies sound sad and others sound happy? Why does “Amazing Grace” serve both moods?
- Why are some melodies easy to memorize and others difficult even to recognize when you hear them again?

TERMS TO REVIEW

- melody** Meaningful succession of pitches.
- phrase** Section of a melody, comparable to a section or phrase of a sentence.
- cadence** Stopping point.
- sequence** Melodic phrase repeated at different levels of pitch.
- tune** Melody that is easy to recognize, memorize, and sing.
- theme** Melody that recurs throughout a section, a movement, or an entire composition.

motive, motivic melody Short melodic phrase that may be effectively developed.

lyrical melody Relatively long, songlike melody.

scale Ascending or descending pattern of half steps, whole steps, or both.

major scale Ascending pattern of steps as follows: whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half.

minor scale Ascending pattern of steps as follows: whole, half, whole, whole, half, whole, whole.

tonic First and most important note of the major or minor scale, to which all other notes in the scale are subordinate.

key The major or minor scale on which a composition is based.

chromatic scale Twelve consecutive half steps within the range of an octave.

whole-tone scale Six consecutive whole steps within the range of an octave.

pentatonic scale Five-note scale.

ENCORE

Optional listening examples*

- Claude Debussy, *Prélude à "L'après-midi d'un faune"* (*Prelude to "The Afternoon of a Faun"*) (whole-tone scale)
- Richard Wagner, "Song to the Evening Star" from *Tannhäuser* (chromaticism)
- Wagner, *Prelude to Tristan und Isolde* (chromaticism)
- Nikolay Andreyevich Rimsky-Korsakov, "Flight of the Bumblebee" (chromaticism)
- Cole Porter, "Night and Day" (chromaticism)
- Ludwig van Beethoven, *Symphony no. 5*, first movement, Listening Example 31 (motivic melody, sequence)
- J. S. Bach, *Fugue in G minor*, Listening Example 20 (minor melody)

Suggestions for further listening

- Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Symphony no. 6 ("Pathétique")*, first movement, second theme (lyrical melody)
- W. A. Mozart, *Symphony No. 40 in G minor*, first movement, Listening Example 24 (minor melody)

*You will find the music to the Optional Listening examples at the Online Learning Center. You may access the Further Listening examples through the Web site, www.mhhe.com/ferrismusic.

Connection

Melody in China and in India

Western listeners are accustomed to hearing music based on the major and minor scales, and sometimes the other scales introduced in this chapter. But many cultures base their music on entirely different scale patterns composed of tones we cannot reproduce on a keyboard, restricted as it is to half steps as the smallest interval. Microtones (lying between the tones of a half step) color the sound of much of the world's music, and intervals and scales of seemingly unlimited variety form the melodic basis of much of the world's music.

According to Chinese legend, the notes, or *lus*, with which they construct their scales were the sounds of their inventor's voice when he spoke in reasoned tones. Another tale ascribes the *lus* to the sounds of birds imitating the tones of different lengths of bamboo pipes. Each *lu* has extramusical connotations corresponding to planets, colors, substances, directions, and so on. Each also represents one month and one animal, a concept related to similar ideas in India, Greece, and Islamic cultures. The tones for a particular composition are selected from one set of *lus* according not so much to musical considerations as to the season or other extramusical concepts.

The classical (Asian) Indian music tradition is based on melodic patterns, called *rāgas*, of five to nine tones. Each *rāga* is associated with certain gods, colors, hours, and seasons, and each is conceived to evoke and sustain a particular mood. Some *rāgas* are even considered to have magical powers. Music students must memorize an enormous number of *rāgas*, though professional musicians often work with just a few. In performance, having chosen a particular *rāga* to serve as a source of inspiration and melodic organization, a musician improvises melodies based on its tones.

Islamic classical music, too, is based on scale patterns variously named in different Islamic countries but sharing with Indian music the concept that each pattern is associated with a particular mood, time of day, season of the year, and color. Each has psychological and medical attributes as well.