



# COMPOSITION GUIDELINES

## for Students & Teachers

### NOTATION

Clear, accurate notation is an essential basic skill for any aspiring composer; it is key to accurately communicating your intentions and musical ideas. Some basics:

- **Key signature, time signature**
- **Tempo markings** (such as *allegro*, *andante*) including **alterations** such as *accel*, *rit*, *fermata*
- **Dynamics and expression marks** (such as *f*, *p*, *cresc*, *dim*)
- **Articulations** (such as *slurs*, *phrases*, *staccato*, *legato*)
- **Correct accidentals**
- **Correct number of beats** per bar

### MELODY

- **How is it structured?**
  - Does it use a motive to generate material or does it grow organically?
    - Example: a “hook” (such as a distinctive interval, a catchy rhythm or an unexpected harmony)
  - Does it have a shape? Does it use a balanced mix of skips, steps and leaps?
  - Does it have a sense of direction, structure of phrases
- **Does it balance variety and familiarity?**
  - do devices such as sequence and repetition go on too long or are they too short to establish the pattern?

### KEY SIGNATURE, HARMONY/COUNTERPOINT

Harmony doesn't mean you have to use conventional cadence formulae (V, I, etc.) at the end of every phrase, or that only traditional harmony is allowed. (Indeed, you are encouraged to explore using chords in

the scale *other* than tonic, dominant and sub-dominant, and especially the use of seventh chords, for example.)

- The use of an **ostinato**, or parallel intervals or chords, or drones can be very effective.
  - Do the chords (or implied chords) follow each other in a **logical succession**?
  - Is the ostinato **long enough** support a section of music without getting boring, but **short enough** to be heard as an ostinato? **Does the music move forward** in the way you want?
- What is your **harmonic rhythm**? (Harmonic rhythm refers to the rhythmic pace of harmonic changes, i. e., one harmony per bar or over several bars, or changing on nearly every beat, etc.)
- If a work is tonal or modal, **does the key signature support the music**, or does it fight with it?
- The **use of less conventional scales** in relation to key signatures, such as pentatonic, octatonic, whole tone, a made-up one, can work well.
  - Use of a **key signature** is fine, but picking one can be hard. You can opt not to use one, or come close with a standard key signature, using accidentals if necessary.
- If yours is a **contrapuntal** work:
  - have you helped the listener hear the separate lines by using **articulations and dynamics**?

## METER AND RHYTHM

- Does the **rhythm** support what you want to accomplish? **Does it move the music forward**, or create a sense of time standing still, or things flowing smoothly?
- Does the **time signature** reflect what is happening in the piece in terms of **common or compound meter**?
  - Example: If the music alternates between beats divided by 2 and beats divided by 3, it isn't necessary to keep changing the time signature if the notation is clear.
- Are the notes you consider important falling on the **strong beats in your time signature**? If not, did you do it on purpose (**syncopation**)?
  - If you are using syncopation, is it set up so that the listener still feels the beat and hears the syncopation?
- A piece that **changes time signatures every measure is hard to perform**. Sometimes you can get the same effect with some **accents**.
- Are your **tempo markings** correct?
- Does your rhythm contain a **variety of note values** without overdoing it?
  - Example: A passage with every note value and pattern you ever learned is just as problematic as one that is all quarter notes.

- As with sequence and melodic repetition, are your **rhythmic patterns** repeated too many times, or not frequently enough?

## FORM, SHAPE, & COHERENCE

There are many choices in what you might choose to do. Here are a few examples:

- ABA or binary
- Rondo
- A programmatic narrative or other
- Some things to keep in mind:
  - Is there enough **contrast between sections** so the listener hears distinct ideas?
  - Does the piece **build** to a climactic point and end, or **build, then relax** to an end?
  - Are there a series of **high points**? Are there too many climaxes or does the piece end too many times?
  - How about **silence**? (This can be an important element in music.)

## CREATIVITY

- **Dynamics, articulations, expression marks:** do they contribute to giving your piece a character of its own?
- **Melody, harmony or rhythm:** what is distinctive about these elements in your piece?
- **If the piece tells a story** (programmatic), does it portray your piece's title, or the description you have given in your program notes?
- **Does your piece include enough variation** to keep the listener engaged?