

Writing Effective Melodies

A melody is a succession of pitches and a succession of note values. In other words, it combines shape and rhythm. **The way in which we combine shape and rhythm creates the style of the melody.** You will learn how to use **rhythm** and **shape** to write effective melodies. Below are some examples from the unit.

For example, if the note values are generally long (such as minims and semibreves), the melody will seem to move slowly – especially if performed at a slow tempo. This is sometimes appropriate in a hymn or lullaby, but it would not be right for a march or dance. On the other hand, it would usually not be appropriate to play fast pieces with many short notes (such as semiquavers) at a funeral.

Study these two melodies:

(a) **Andante** BEETHOVEN Diabelli Variation no.20

(b) **Allegretto** MOZART Serenade a 13 K361 Trio 2 of Menuet 2

Both melodies move largely by step, with notes of largely the same length. However one is more lively than the other. Why?

Rhythms can be made more interesting rhythmically by using rests, dotted notes or triplets. Jazz players often use **syncopation** (moving the stress from the main beat to somewhere else in the bar – such as tying a note over a barline, or putting a rest on a strong beat.) All three methods can be seen in this extract, in which there are crotchet triplets, and notes tied over a bar line – one of which adds up to three beats, as if it is a dotted minim. So although most notes are crotchets, the rhythm is still interesting.

DEBUSSY La Mer 1905

Circle the rhythm that Debussy repeats to unify the melody (make it hold together).

Melodies which stay within a small range and move largely by step tend to be more gentle and peaceful than melodies that move over a wide range and have many jumps (especially jumps in opposite directions).

This melody, for example, has a range of an 11th, and changes direction many times. It is made even more lively by being played quite quickly, with several notes played staccato and no slurs more than two notes long. There is also a sudden change of dynamics half-way through.

Allegretto MOZART Serenade a 13 Gran Partita 1782 Menuetto 2

This haunting melody played by the cor anglais is played softly, with shaded dynamics, and moves only by step, with some quite long slurs.

DEBUSSY La Mer – Jeux de Vagues Cor anglais melody