

How to write and record a song in six easy steps:

1. Prepare the lyrics
2. Set the lyrics to a melody
3. Harmonize the melody (add chords)
4. Arrange for piano and voice and create a guide vocal recording
5. Create an instrumental arrangement/recording of the song
6. Record the vocals and assemble the final version of the recorded song

The song creation process can also be divided into 3 separate phases: the *lyric writing phase* consists of step 1; the *composition phase* consists of steps 2 to 4; the *production phase* consists of steps 5 and 6.

1. Prepare the lyrics

Whether you are writing the lyrics yourself or working with a lyricist, ideally lyrics should have a consistent *meter* (number of syllables per line and syllable stress pattern aka *foot*) for each unique section of the song (i.e. verse, chorus, bridge, etc.). Lyrics without any regular meter can be set to music, but it usually takes much longer to complete the song this way (and longer for the singer/performer to learn the song).

Alternatively you can use a *ghost melody*, i.e. taking a song you already know (which may be in a similar style of the new song you wish to create), write new lyrics overtop the melody, and then create new music for those lyrics. This helps give structure to the lyrics to make the composer's job easier.

When writing lyrics, use simple words and sentence structure that you would use in a conversation.

If the lyrics are not finished at this point, you need at least one completed version of each unique song section (e.g. verse, chorus, and bridge) to begin writing the music. The more consistent the meter, the easier it is to write the rest of the song after the first of each unique section is written. Once the final draft of the lyrics are sent to the composer, the lyric writing phase of the song creation process is complete.

2. Set the lyrics to a melody

This involves 5 steps:

- i) Decide the time signature and tempo of the song
- ii) Determine the timing of the phrases by using the meter (ask yourself how many syllables per line are there and what's the foot or pattern of stress per group of syllables?) and the natural rhythm of the spoken lyrics
- iii) Choose a key and mode (major or minor) for the song
- iv) Decide the range of the song (generally an octave or less for average singers)
- v) Create a melody for the song based on the natural pitch contour of the spoken lyrics.

Step V is the most critical and also the most difficult to teach. The pitch contour of speech tells us not only what type of sentence we're using (statement vs. question vs. command) and when a sentence ends, but it also expresses the emotion behind the words. This is why translating the natural pitch contour of the spoken lyrics into the notes of the major scale is an effective way of capturing the emotional essence of the lyrics in the melody itself.

Few tips on writing good melodies: a) Keep melodies simple and easy to sing. Easy to sing = easy for the listener to remember. Most motion is *stepwise* and leaps are generally followed by stepwise motion in the opposite direction (e.g. Somewhere Over the Rainbow); b) Most good melodies have a *climax* or unique/rare high note. This usually occurs either 2/3rds of the way through or at the end of the melody (e.g. verse of I Promise You); c) Vary the contour of the melody to prevent the song from becoming too repetitive and hence boring.

3. Harmonize or add chords to the melody

Harmony in a nutshell is the study of *chords* and *chord progressions*.

Chords

Most popular music consists of *triads*, which are three note chords.

There are 7 triads associated with any key of the major scale (C major for example):

A – C – E; B – D – F; C – E – G; D – F – A; E – G – B; F – A – C; G – B – D.

It is helpful to memorize these note configurations, since these same triads are used in all keys of the major scale. These are inflected by the *key signature* or pattern of sharps and flats associated with each major key. Knowing all 15 major key signatures is also extremely helpful for a composer/songwriter.

There are 3 types of triads associated with the major scale:

Major (1 – 3 – 5) or (+4 +3 semitones)

Minor (1 – b3 – 5) or (+3 +4 semitones)

Diminished (1 – b3 – b5) or (+3 +3 semitones)

Chord Progressions

I use a simple but powerful formula that helps me write chord changes quickly and helps me always know what is the right chord to use in a song (at least 9 times out of 10).

There are two types of *root movement* or types of intervals between one chord and another:

Type A: Down a fifth, down a third, up a second;

Type B: Up a fifth, up a third, or down a second.

Type A progressions are favored in classical/common practice music (about 80% of the time) and in ‘pop’ music. Type B progressions are more common in modal/pre-classical music, blues, and rock music from the 60s, 70s, and early 90s.

I write ‘pop’ songs for the most part so I tend to favor Type A root movements in my music.

There are several *chord progression patterns* that are used over and over again in popular music (see p. 5 “Common Chord Progression Patterns” handout). Certain chord patterns are associated with specific styles or genres of music, so I choose the chord patterns I use based on what kind of song I’m attempting to create. Being able to play these chord patterns in all 12 keys on your instrument is extremely helpful in writing music for essentially any style or genre.

Melodies are *harmonized* by playing a triad/chord which includes the same note in the melody you are attempting to harmonize (or the particular notes in the melody held for the longest duration) at the same time. The chords follow the melody in other words. Keep the chord changes simple to avoid distracting from the melody, but throw in some unexpected chords to add colour and to avoid clichés. Some musicians are able to do this intuitively when creating their own music. To study harmony formally is a very involved process and can take several years to master.

4. Arrange for piano and voice and create a guide vocal recording

When doing piano arrangements, I use a simple accompaniment technique called *closed position keyboard style*. Keyboardists have been playing this way for literally centuries.

This means the left hand plays one note (the bass voice) and the right hand generally plays the three notes of the triad (the tenor, alto, and soprano voices respectively). This allows the left hand to play bass lines and the right hand to provide both the chordal accompaniment and the option of playing the melody (as the soprano or highest voice).

A *guide vocal recording* is used to help the singer/performer learn the song. This is created by recording the piano (or guitar) accompaniment part, plus a rough version of the vocals (I use a USB headset mic) all the way through the song. This can be shared with the lyricist (to document how the song sounds so far) and/or performer of the song (so it can be learned before the final recording is completed). Quick/rough/partial guide vocal recordings are also known as *scratch recordings*.

Once the guide vocal recording is done, then the compositional phase of the song creation process can be said to be complete (notwithstanding future alterations to the lyrics and/or the song's melodic/harmonic structure).

Arranging and producing music takes much more time than composing, so if you are writing music for a collaborator or client, make sure he/she is happy with the music before proceeding to the next steps. Make sure you find the right key for the singer at this point also for the same reasons.

5. Create an instrumental arrangement/recording of the song

If enough time was taken to create the piano part in the guide vocal recording, you can start adding other instruments right away (I use virtual instruments in Reason exclusively for the most part). I usually add the bass first, followed by the drums, and then additional instruments like strings, organs, backing vocals (guide vocal form), and percussion. In general I try to keep arrangements simple, but some songs call for more complex instrumentation.

In writing orchestral arrangements, there are four or five main sections of the orchestra: strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion, and choir (optional).

To write an orchestral arrangement, first you write an arrangement for piano. To use the film analogy, write the script before you shoot the movie. Then you adapt that for strings (which are the foundation or primary instrument of the orchestra). Then add woodwinds, brass, and percussion for colour.

That's writing for orchestra in a nutshell!

6. Record the vocals and assemble the final version of the recorded song

Once an instrumental arrangement of the song is completed, then the vocals can be recorded.

The affordability of computer based multi-track recording hardware and software means vocal tracks are almost always recorded in multiple *takes* or recorded segments.

After the vocals are finished being recorded, the best sections of the different takes are assembled into a *composite track* or *comp* for short. This is added to the instrumental arrangement and may undergo further editing including added effects processing. The instrumental arrangement may also continue to be changed at this point.

Once the final recorded version of the song is ready, a two channel stereo mix-down is created, which is then ready for audio-post production (mastering) and then distribution in physical form (e.g. CD or vinyl) or digital form (e.g. Mp3 download or streaming). The production phase of the song creation process is now finished.

Common Chord Progression Patterns

[The arrows & number below the chord progression refers to the root movement interval (i.e. up or down a 5th) and the letter below that refers to whether the interval belongs to Type A or B category root movement]

“I IV V I” progression:

||: C | F | G | C :||
 ↓5 ↑2 ↓5
 A A A

E.g. Most classical music, numerous ‘pop’ songs, e.g. I Wanna Hold Your Hand, Bad Romance, Louie Louie, etc.

“Classic Rock” progression:

(V IV I or I bVII IV)
||: G | F | C | C :||
 ↓2 ↑5 (↑5)
 B B B

E.g. Numerous classic rock songs (Sweet Home Alabama, Fortunate Son, etc.); last 4 bars of 12 bar blues

“Rhythm Changes” progression:

(I vi ii V)
||: C | A- | D- | G :||
 ↓3 ↓5 ↓5 (↓5)
 A A A A

E.g. jazz standards based on I Got Rhythm, Heart and Soul, 50s popular music (I vi IV V variation), e.g. Stand By Me, Soundtrack to Grease, 50s doo-wop, etc.

“Avril Lavigne Secret Chord Progression” (or “Avril Lavigne” progression):

(I V vi IV)
||: C | G | A- | F :||
 ↑5 ↑2 ↓3 (↑5)
 B A A B

E.g. With or Without You (U2); When I Come Around (Green Day); (and countless other 90s alt rock songs); Complicated and My Happy Ending by Avril Lavigne