



What Makes a Good Song?

5 MINUTES READING #1

“Words make you think. Music makes you feel. A song makes you feel a thought”

- Yip Harburg



Questions to think about:

1. If you could only have **ONE** song on your Spotify® or iTunes® playlist, what song would it be? Why?
2. Think of three different songs that have **HOOKS/RIFFS** that you can sing or hum memorably and that other people will recognize.
3. Think of three different songs that have **LYRICS** on different themes or subject matter.
4. Re-read the final paragraph and rank the 5 features of ‘What Makes a Good Song?’ into the most important to least important. Be prepared to justify your decision.

Everybody has a “favourite song” that they like, enjoy, listen to and often it means something special to them. Many people have several “favourite songs” and apps such as Spotify® and iTunes® make it easy to group our favourite songs together in ‘playlists’ so they are all in one place.

But what makes our “favourite songs” better than the millions of other songs ever written? Often, it is the visual aspect of the song’s performance that we enjoy: eye-catching videos, good looking artists or band members, talented singers and instrumentalists, catchy tunes (or more correctly **MELODIES**) or meaningful words (**LYRICS**).

We often classify songs as ‘good’ as they contain a ‘catchy bit’ which is easily remembered. This ‘catchy bit’ of the song, which we often sing or hum from memory and is that part that ‘everyone knows’, is called the **HOOK**. A Hook (or Hooks: there may be more than one!), is often short and repeated in different places throughout the song. Popular songs also contain **RIFFS**: a repeated musical pattern which again makes the song memorable.

How a song is made up of or divided into different sections is called the **FORM AND STRUCTURE** of a song. These include sections like the Introduction, Verses, Links, Pre-Chorus, Chorus, Bridge/Middle 8 and Coda.



Often, it is the words of a song sung by the lead singer or backing singers, what we call the **LYRICS** that mean something to us and why we like certain songs more than others.

CHORDS form the **HARMONY** on which most popular songs are built. The **BASS LINE** and **MELODY LINE** are often created from a song’s **CHORD PATTERN**. The **DRUM KIT** and other **PERCUSSION** instruments often provide a rhythmic backing and help keep the song’s regular **RHYTHM** and **BEAT**.

When thinking about ‘What Makes a Good Song?’, most people would say that a ‘good song’ needs: a memorable **HOOK/RIFF**, an organised **FORM AND STRUCTURE**, effective **LYRICS**, a good **RHYTHM** and **BEAT** and a strong **CHORD PATTERN** which makes good **BASS LINES**, **CHORDS** and **MELODIES**.



Song Structure

5 MINUTES READING #2

Typical Popular Song Structure

Introduction
Verse 1
 (Link)
Verse 2
 (Pre-Chorus)
Chorus
 (Link)
Verse 3
 (Pre-Chorus)
Chorus
Bridge/Middle 8
 (Pre-Chorus)
Chorus
Chorus
Coda

Questions to think about:

1. Why do you think it's important to listen to a recording of a song when analysing its form and structure as well as researching the lyrics?
2. Can you think of some more songs (of any style) that are in **STROPHIC FORM**?
3. What do you think the "8" means in "**MIDDLE 8**"?
4. Can you think of any songs that feature dramatic instrumental or vocal solos in the **BRIDGE/MIDDLE 8** sections?
5. To what extent is form and structure important when writing a song?

Just like many other types of music, songs are made up of different sections or parts. How these sections are divided up and the order in which they occur is called the **FORM AND STRUCTURE** of the song. Whereas in Western Classical Music we often use letters of the alphabet to describe the form and structure of a piece of music (e.g. *Binary Form AB*; *Ternary Form ABA*; *Rondo Form ABACADA..*), when describing the structure of a song, we use certain specific musical terms. Some sections in a song have sung words, called **LYRICS**; other sections are **INSTRUMENTAL** and some sections can be repeated more than once within a song. To work out the form and structure of a song, it is helpful to analyse the lyrics (which can almost always be found on the internet) and to listen to a recording of the song for other sections such as instrumentals.

Most popular songs start with an **INTRODUCTION** (often shortened to 'intro'), which occurs at the start of a song and is the first section of music we hear. This sets the mood of the song and is sometimes, but not always an instrumental using the song's **CHORD PATTERN**.

Popular songs normally have several **VERSES**. Verses introduce the song's theme and have the same melody but different lyrics for each verse which helps develop the song's narrative and story. Songs made up entirely of verses are called **STROPHIC**. A **LINK**, a short section often used to join different parts of a song together, often instrumental, sometimes joins verses together or appears at other points within a song.

Some songs have a **PRE-CHORUS** which is a section of music that occurs **before** the main **CHORUS** of the song which helps move the music forward and prepare for the chorus. The **CHORUS** occurs several times within a song and often contains the most memorable **HOOK/RIFF**. The chorus (also called **REFRAIN**) relays the message of the song and is repeated with the same melody and lyrics each time it is heard. In popular songs, the chorus is often repeated several times towards the end of the song.

The **MIDDLE 8** or **BRIDGE** section offers musical contrast and often features an instrumental or vocal solo using new musical material allowing the performer to display their technical skill on their instrument or voice.

The **CODA** (often shortened to 'outro') is the final section of a song which brings the song to a close. 'Coda' is Italian for 'tail'.

There is no 'set structure' for a song, although the diagram at the top left shows the form and structure of a typical popular song. Most popular songs have an **INTRODUCTION, VERSES, CHORUS, BRIDGE/MIDDLE 8** and **CODA**.



Primary and Secondary Chords

5 MINUTES READING #4

“The universe is arranged like a cithara in which different kinds of things sound together harmoniously, just as they do in a chord.”

- Honorius Of Autun



Questions to think about:

1. There are many different ways to play the notes of chords as a backing to a song, rather than just a triad. How many different ways can you think of performing chords to make them more exciting?
2. Can you work out what notes would make up chords **I**, **IV**, **V** and **V7** (the **PRIMARY CHORDS**) in the key of G Major? What about F Major?
3. Websites, such as “Chordify”[®] allow us to quickly find out the chord patterns to almost any song. What are the advantages and disadvantages about websites such as this?

Two or more notes sounding together are known as a **CHORD**. Many songs are based on a repeated pattern known as a **CHORD PATTERN** or **CHORD PROGRESSION**. A **TRIAD** is a chord of **THREE NOTES**. For example, C + E + G is the C Major triad. C is the **ROOT** note, E is the **THIRD** (an interval of three notes above the root) and G is the **FIFTH** (the interval of five notes about the root).

Chords are often identified using Roman numerals. In any Major key, the chords built on the first, fourth and fifth degrees of the scale are all **MAJOR CHORDS**. In the key of C, these are the chords of C (**I**), F (**IV**) and G (**V**). The chords of **I**, **IV** and **V** are called **PRIMARY CHORDS** and are the most used chords in songs (shown in the boxes below in C Major)

When a seventh is added to a chord, this is known as a **SEVENTH CHORD**. The **DOMINANT SEVENTH** chord can be shown by the symbol **V7**. For example, G7 (shown by the example left), is made by taking the major triad of G (G + B + D) and adding and F (G + B + D + F) – F being 7 notes above the root of the chord, G. Dominant seventh chords are used frequently in popular songs, particularly before Chord **I** as they have a strong “pull” back to Chord **I** (also called the **TONIC CHORD**).

SECONDARY CHORDS are chords based on the second (**II**), third (**III**), sixth (**VI**) and seventh (**VII**) degrees of the scale. In a Major key, chords **II**, **III** and **VI** are all minor chords. (Chord **VII** is a tricky chord and can be described as **DIMINISHED** but do not worry about Chord **VII** as it is difficult to use!)

Many songs, such as Rock ‘n’ Roll songs from the 1950’s and Blues songs use only **PRIMARY CHORDS**, often including **DOMINANT SEVENTHS**. Often popular songwriters use some **SECONDARY CHORDS** to create different effects (as they are minor chords in a major key). The following **CHORD PATTERN** is called the “**FOUR-CHORD TRICK**” and has been used as a basis for many different songs from different times and places:

I – VI – IV – V7

Song Textures

5 MINUTES READING #5

monophonic



One melody, no accompaniment

homophonic



Melody with chordal accompaniment

polyphonic



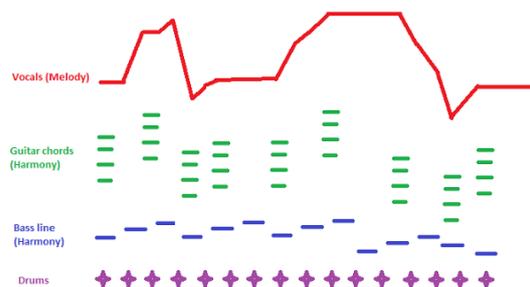
Two or more melodies at the same time

Questions to think about:

1. Can you think of other examples of songs that we often sing in **A CAPPELLA** style?
2. Can you think of any other singers who accompany themselves on a musical instrument?
3. Think of a song that uses a **LEAD SINGER** along with **BACKING SINGERS**? Describe the part sung by the backing singers within the song.
4. Can you think of any songs which have **COUNTER MELODIES** sung by backing singers or other members of the band?

Singers are essential to all types of song. A single singer singing without accompaniment is called a **SOLOIST** and this type of singing is called **A CAPPELLA** singing (without any form of musical accompaniment or instruments). The texture of a single melody line such as this, is called a **MONOPHONIC TEXTURE**; the same texture could be applied to a single melody line on a musical instrument. We often sing songs such as “Happy Birthday” in **A CAPPELLA** style, often with more than one person singing the melody, but because we are all singing the same melody and words at the same time, we can still identify this vocal texture as **MONOPHONIC**.

Many singer-songwriters accompany themselves on a musical instrument such as Lady Gaga, Alicia Keys (*shown left*) and John Legend who often provide a musical accompaniment to their songs on the piano. The guitar is another



popular instrument on which singers can accompany themselves such as Eric Clapton. When the melody of a song is performed by the singer and accompanied on a musical instrument or by a band, the texture of the song can be

described as **HOMOPHONIC**: a melody line with an accompaniment.

Often the “frontline” member of a pop band, the ‘most famous’ band member, takes on the role as **LEAD SINGER**. Lead singers sing most of the melody of a song such as the verses and choruses. Other band members often join in during the chorus or at other certain points within a song providing **HARMONY**: using different notes to the melody line but which still ‘fit well’ with the melody, often using different notes from the **CHORD** used at that point in the song. Some solo artists often have **BACKING SINGERS** who provide harmonies to their melody line, sing a different melody ‘over the top’ of theirs (a **COUNTER-MELODY**) or sing in the chorus.

If there are many different layers of sound: vocal melody, backing singers singing in harmony or a counter-melody, drums and percussion providing a rhythm section, chords on guitars or keyboard and bass line on a bass guitar, then the texture of a song can sound thick and complex with the different parts ‘interweaving’ and overlapping with each other. We can describe this musical texture in a song as **POLYPHONIC**.





Song Timbres and Sonorities

5 MINUTES READING #6



Questions to think about:

1. "Everyone wants to learn to play the drums!" How far do you agree or disagree with this statement?
2. Can you name any other percussion instruments from your music classroom that have been used in the rhythm section of songs?
3. Which is your favourite musical instrument to listen to accompany a song? Why?
4. Some songwriters include very unusual **TIMBRES** and **SONORITIES** within their songs. Can you think of any examples?

We often think of a 'good song' as having a 'good beat'. The beat or rhythm of a popular song is often performed by the **DRUM KIT** which is part of the **RHYTHM SECTION** of a pop band. A standard drum kit has seven drums and cymbals: the **BASS DRUM** (operated with a foot pedal and emphasising the strong beats of the bar), the **SNARE DRUM** (with springs underneath often used on the weaker beats of the bar), the **HI-HAT CYMBALS** (also operated with a foot pedal) and the **FLOOR TOM, TOM-TOMS** and **RIDE CYMBAL** used for **DRUM FILLS** which provide a contrast to the main beat.



As well as the drum kit, **PERCUSSION** is often used within the rhythm section including instruments such as Tambourines, Maracas, Bongos, Shakers and Wind Chimes.



We might also think of a song as a 'good song' as we like the certain sound, **TIMBRE** or **SONORITY** of a musical instrument used in the song. Guitars are often used to accompany popular songs, the **ACOUSTIC GUITAR** as well as **ELECTRIC GUITARS** (often two: the **LEAD GUITAR** and **RHYTHM GUITAR**) and **BASS GUITAR**. Guitarists often add special effects (in the form of foot pedal units (*shown above left*)) to their playing such as *Wah-wah*, *overdrive*, *distortion*, *fuzz*, *chorus*, *delay* and *reverb* which alters the timbre and sonority of the guitars' sound.

KEYBOARDS, synthesisers and sometimes a **PIANO** are used as instruments within a band to provide harmony, chords and even instrumental solos.



Orchestral instruments now feature more commonly as an accompaniment in popular songs. **STRINGS** (Violins, Violas, Cellos and Double Basses) as well as the **SAXOPHONE, TRUMPET** and **TROMBONE** from the brass section of the orchestra are all used alongside the more 'traditional' instruments within a pop band.