MUSIC COMPOSITION
FOR PIANO

Composing New Ideas on the Piano

A Quick Start Guide

By Matti Carter

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① Introduction

Welcome to "Composing New Ideas on the Piano" - quick start guide!

After reading through this short guide, you will have a better understanding of what composing a full piece on the piano involves .

In addition, we will be diving deeper into the first stage of the composition process: the idea creation phase. We will cover some essential information about improvisation and how it relates to composition, so that you can start creating musical ideas today!

Is This for Me?

This guide is designed for piano players who already know the basics of music theory, and want to learn how to compose.

 Here are the minimum recommended requirements:

· Understanding and knowing how to read musical notation
· Knowing how to play major and minor chords on the piano
· Able to play intermediate level pieces on the piano
· Familiar with the most basic major and minor keys
· Interested in learning and becoming good at composition

The Three Stages Of Composition

1) Creating Ideas

Creating new ideas is the first stage of the composition process. This stage involves a lot of improvisation and different ways of approaching new musical ideas. The goal of this stage is to learn how start composing from nothing, and transfer what is in your head to actual music.

2) Further Developing Ideas

Composition is not just about creating new ideas. In fact, most of the time is spent editing the ideas that already exist. This stage is all about making the most of the material that already exists, and creating new variations of it.

3) Structure And Completion

The final stage of composition is structuring and completing your piece. Once we have our musical ideas and all the material written out, we need to be able to structure it in a way that tells our own unique, musical story.

The Importance Of Recording Your Ideas

When composing, it is essential to write down or record your fresh ideas so that you don't forget about them later. Whenever you come up with a good idea, write it down on paper or record it. If you don't do this, you may later remember that you'd had a great idea but discover that you've forgotten exactly what it sounded like!

(2) Improvisation

Definition: Improvisation in music means experimenting with different variations of musical ideas. It involves creatively using the available resources at hand, such as your listening skills to compose music spontaneously.

Improvising is a great way to get started generating new musical ideas. If we don't have full ideas in our head yet, we can generate new ones by improvising and trying out new things on the piano.

In the beginning we are looking for very short and simple ideas. These types of ideas are relatively easy to create, and can always be modified into more complex ideas at a later stage.

When improvising and creating musical ideas, I tend to start by focusing heavily on one of these three musical elements:

- Rhythm
- Melody
- Harmony

Focusing on these different elements separately will make you understand each specific element better. You can always combine the elements together afterwards.

For example, you may want to focus more specifically on the melody of your piece before combining it with the harmony (or vice versa).

Let's go through some of the possibilities for each of the three musical elements.

2.1 Rhythm

Definition: Rhythm is the placement of sounds in time.

It's hard to imagine creating a musical composition based on rhythm alone. However, rhythm is the element that gives music a lot of its character. This is why starting with the rhythm can help you create some very distinctive ideas.

Some of my best musical ideas began just with the rhythm alone. I imagined the rhythm in my head first, then added the melody and harmony to it later.

Before creating specific rhythms, try to imagine what the character of your piece will be.

Will it be happy, mysterious, fast moving, sad, lively, exciting, energetic or something else?

Imagining the character of the piece will help you get started with creating the rhythm.

When you've thought about the character of the piece, write it down on paper. After that, start creating short rhythmic ideas that resemble that character.

The ideas don't have to be perfectly polished yet. At this stage, you are only brainstorming different rhythmic ideas.

For example, if you want to compose an energetic piece, you might be looking for a fast moving rhythm with a lot of short notes:
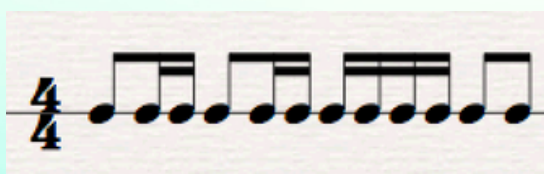
This notation shows the 4/4 time signature with fast 8th and 16th notes.

In contrast, a very slow rhythm with long notes can make the character of the music completely different:
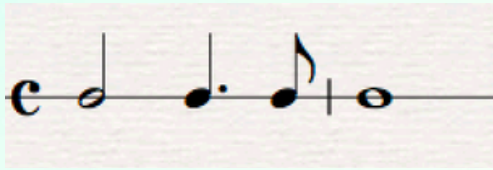
This notation shows the C-time signature, which is short for "common time".

The rhythm will also help determine the style of your piece. Knowing the time signature and the tempo will help determine whether your piece is a waltz, a march, an etude or something else.

For example a piece with a tempo of 100 bpm (bpm=beats per minute) and a 3/4 time signature is going to have a completely different character compared to a piece that is 160 bpm with a 4/4 time signature.

Having a clearly defined tempo and style will help you create very specific rhythmic ideas.

You can also add a lot of complexity to your rhythmic ideas using dotted notes and polyrhythms. Here are two examples:
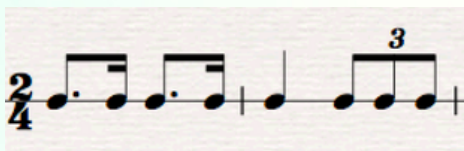
This rhythm uses dottet notes and triplets. Triplets are a common form of rhythm in music.
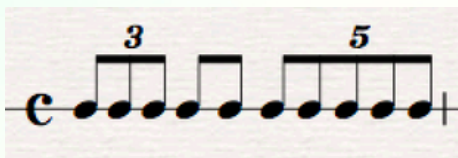
This rhythm has a quintuplet-polyrhythm at the end, which is one of the more complex rhythms in music.

Your goal: Create 5-10 distinctive rhythmic ideas

2.2 Melody

Definition: A linear succession of musical sounds that the listener perceives as a single entity. It is the theme of the sound, which is ofter referred to as the "tune". If a tune is satisfying to the ear, it is sometimes referred to as the "hook" of a song, encouraging a listener to want to hear it again.

Creating melody is one of my favourite parts of composition. In my opinion, it is the most memorable element of music.

A very simple but effective way to write melody, is to start by creating motifs.

A **motif** is a combination of a small amount of notes played in succession, with a distinctive rhythm. A full melodic theme is comprised of many motifs.

You can come up with motifs by improvising on the piano, followed by recording or writing down the ideas.

The motifs you discover should be very short and simple, something that you will not have trouble remembering or singing. These ideas can be developed and lengthened later.

Start by creating motifs that are **3-6 notes** in length.

Combining Intervals To Form Motifs

An interval is the distance between two pitches.

The best way to create motifs is by playing around with different intervals and listening to what they sound like together.

For example, if you like the sound of the perfect fifth interval, you could use it to create a short motif.

The fifth interval is the distance between the notes C and G. A short motif using those two pitches could look like this:

C-C-C-G

Playing these notes in succession with the same rhythm isn't very exciting, so try giving the notes a distinctive rhythm. See how many different ways you can play the notes C-C-C-G

When you get bored with that, you could add a few more intervals. Try going C-C-G-A-G. Then start playing around with the rhythm again.

The goal is to pick a few notes at a time and see what kind of melodic combinations you can come up with. You can pick any notes, even ones that don't belong in the same key. Use your ear to find the most satisfying melodic combinations.

As mentioned in the previous section, the character of the piece can also determine what intervals you use in your melodies.

Spend some time coming up with different combinations, and write down the motifs you like the most. Try to come up with 5-10 unique motifs.

Examples Of Famous Musical Motifs

Star Wars - The Imperial March
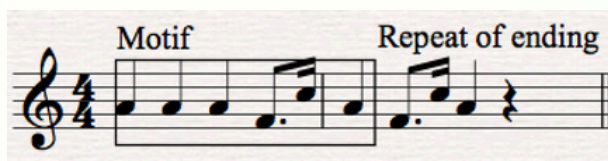
Pirates Of The Caribbean- Theme

Beethoven - Symphony No. 5

2.3 Harmony

Definition: Harmony means simultaneously occurring frequencies, pitches, or chords. Harmony is sometimes referred to as the "vertical" aspect of music, because it adds depth to the sound.

A great way to start creating harmony is improvising chord progressions on the piano. All you need to know is how to play some basic major- and minor chords on the piano, and you'll be able to come up with an endless amount of different chord progressions.

First, we need to pick a key and become familiar with the chords of that key.

For this example, let's pick the easiest key of C-major. Before we start improvising in this key, let's go through all of the seven different chord degrees that belong to that key, and demonstrate them using roman numerals:

I   C-major
ii D-minor
iii E-minor
IV F-major
V G-major
vi A-minor
vii B-diminished

Note: The capitalised roman numerals illustrate major chords, and the small letters illustrate minor chords. Composing chord progressions using roman numerals is very effective, because they can be applied to any key.

Once we have selected the key, we can create an empty template for a four bar chord progression:

| | | |

I'm using four bars as an example, but you could choose whichever amount of bars works best for you. I recommend keeping it short, a maximum of eight bars to begin with.

Our first goal is to fill in the bars with chords, using only the chords that belong to the selected key. You can create any combination using the chords in the key of C-major.

Let's start improvising some different chord combinations. When you have found something that you like, write it down or record it. After improvising for some time, you may have come up with several chord progressions. Here is an example of a simple four-bar chord progression that I came up with:

C C/E **|** F **|** Am G **|** C

Let's analyse this chord progression using roman numerals:

I I6 **|** IV **|** vi V **|** I **|**

Note: The 6 after the "I" illustrates the first inversion of the C-major chord (C/E).

Now that we have the chord degrees figured out, we can start building other musical elements on top (such as melody or rhythm).

Coming up with chord progressions in this way is fun and easy, and a great way to start developing the chord structure of your piece. It's a good idea to practice improvising chord progressions in different keys, not just C-major. This will help you become more familiar with different keys.

Here are some simple examples of chord progressions of famous pieces, where the chord degrees are illustrated using roman numerals:

The Beatles - Let It Be I **|** V **|** vi **|** IV
Beethoven - Ode to Joy   I **|** V **|** I **|** I V
Adele - Hello i **|** VI **|** III **|** VII

③ What's Next...

I hope this guide has made you excited about composing with the piano. We have only scratched the surface of the full composition process, and there is a lot more information to cover. If you want to find out more, I will be taking you through the three stages of composition in more depth in a full online course. Stay tuned!

④ About The Author

I am Matti Carter, the founder of Music Composition for Piano. When I started composing at the age of 8, I had no idea what I was doing. In the beginning I tried teaching myself everything through trial and error, and it took me many years before I finally started getting results.

After many years of self learning, I finally succeeded in composing something that sounded good. The problem was, I still didn't fully understand what I was doing when composing the piece.

I started taking composition lessons and gradually started getting answers to my questions. I started gaining new tools and more control over the composition process. Later I got accepted to study music at university, and completed a Batchelor's degree in Music Composition with piano as my main instrument.

After 20 years of composing, I've realised that I may have saved many years of trial and error, had I had the right tools and teacher in front of me in the very beginning.

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